

Thy Kingdom Come: Promise Amid Ambiguity

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Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Scripture: Isaiah 7:10-16, Matthew 1:18-25

This morning's scripture gives us a snapshot of two men. On the surface of their stories, their stories would seem to have little in common. Ahaz, king of Judea, and Joseph, who husband to Mary, lived 700 years apart. One was royalty at the zenith of his life, the other a commoner just becoming an adult.

But a closer look reveals that both men faced difficult dilemmas and life-changing choices. As King of Judea, Ahaz led a nation surrounded and threatened by hostile neighbors. Joseph was newly engaged, but facing an unexpected revelation about his bride to be, a conundrum that no man before or after him would ever know.

Gathered here on Sunday morning, with Christmas only six days away and our to-do lists competing with our every thought, our lives may seem entirely disconnected from these two ancient figures.

What ties these men together – and us to them - is that they were caught up in God's drama, the story of how God promises a way through uncertainty and ambiguity. Their story is our story and the promise they heard is the same promise given to us. That promise came to them – and to us in the same phrase: "a young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel."

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Let's start with King Ahaz. He was the twelfth king of Judea after it had split from the nation of Israel. He reigned for 20 years toward the close of the 8th century AD, a time when the borders of his kingdom were shrinking fast. The Bible attributes these setbacks to Ahaz's impiety and indulgences in pagan worship of the most abominable kind.

About two years into Ahaz's reign, the city of Jerusalem, which had long been the spiritual capital of Yahweh's people, faced an imposing threat. A coalition of kings from neighboring Israel planned to invade Jerusalem and overthrow Ahaz. They hoped that the city might become a stronghold against the even more threatening Assyrians.

Enter Isaiah, a prophet to the world and an advisor to Ahaz. He brings words of assurance that the invasion would not succeed and Ahaz would continue to hold the throne.

What must Ahaz have been thinking? Having built temples to pagan idols, he knew that he was probably not God's favorite. He knew his nation was surrounded by hostile rulers, many of whom coveted the holy city of Jerusalem. All the more baffling then that, Isaiah, a devoted man of God, comes with assurances that all would be ok, that God would take care of Ahaz. What am I supposed to believe, Ahaz must have thought, the reality of the worldly threats all around me or the words of this man, the promise that the God I have disrespected is going to save me?

That was Ahaz and Ahaz's dilemma. Let's put that part of the story on pause for just a moment and think about Joseph.

Only the gospels of Luke and Matthew tell us anything about Joseph and what they tell us is not a lot. After Jesus' birth, we learn that he adopts Christ and treats him as his own son, likely teaching him his trade of carpentry. The picture that emerges over several chapters is of a man who is a devoted husband and father, humble, generous, dutiful and conscientious.

But he is introduced as Mary's fiancé. Matthew's account says only that he learns Mary is "found" to be with child before they had had marital relations. Suddenly, Joseph's expectations of a pleasant time of preparation for marriage with respected young local women are turned upside down. Confusion replaces joy, emotions get jumbled and happy hopes of newly wedded life are suddenly shrouded in shame. As with Ahaz, Joseph faces his own impossible choice: what is best for his life and reputation and for Mary's?

So there we have these two men of such dissimilar circumstances, but each with his own problem. And, oddly enough, both have the same reaction.

Ahaz receives Isaiah's words of assurance that the impending invasion will not succeed ... and chooses not to accept them. Or so he tries. His prophet and advisor Isaiah encourages Ahaz to take the matter straight to God:

"Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven."
(7:11)

But Ahaz, perhaps keenly aware that he has not fostered God's favor, is reluctant. He hasn't exactly turned to God for help or guidance up to this point, his thinking seems to go; better not take his chances now, of all times.

"... Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.: (7:12)

Now think about Joseph and what he does to try to get ahead of God. When presented with the news that Mary is pregnant, he tries to take matters into his own hands, as opposed to letting go and letting God.

The gospel of Matthew reads: Joseph, "being a righteous man and unwilling to expose (Mary) to public disgrace, planned to quietly dismiss her."

Ahaz seems to have little use for God and declines Isaiah's advice to ask God for a sign. Joseph is afraid, maybe even a bit in shock. He seems simply to be doing his best to think his way through a potentially life-changing quandary not of his making.

Do you see what both Ahaz and Joseph try to do? They both could use a dose of divine guidance, but neither seeks it. Instead, they try to navigate through the ambiguity of their circumstances all by themselves.

Here, again, we're reminded of that old adage: If you want to make God laugh, tell God your plans.

God ignores Ahaz's brush-off. Through Isaiah, God gives the king the sign he didn't have the courage to request:

Isaiah tells the king, "Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel."

He will become a boy, Isaiah continues, and will grow up safely because the current threats will pass by without harm to Ahaz's kingdom.

In the same way, God had a different plan than the one that Joseph had in mind. Matthew writes:

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

Matthews continues:

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel."

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For centuries and centuries, God's people have put faith in the link between these two stories. As with so many parts of our faith, scholars and theologians debate certain points: Was the child foretold in Isaiah specifically the Christ? Or is the larger point that the child represented a promise and a future, a hope for King Ahaz when he had none?

Debates also continue about whether the angel sent to Joseph invoked the essence of Isaiah's prophecy, but added the word "virgin," which was not in Isaiah's original words, to describe Mary, the mother of Emmanuel.

Is the promise of Jesus Christ's birth a literal fulfillment of Isaiah's vision? Or is it an echo, a later-day manifestation of a promise that God had made to God's people so many times before, this time taking shape in the definitive form of the true Immanuel, God truly with us?

For today, anyway I say we leave those distinctions to the scholars and theologians and focus instead on what is truer than true about the parallels between these two stories and how we might relate them to our own stories, if we were to be so bold.

As with Ahaz and Joseph, we live in times of great ambiguity. Last year, I said I would always think of 2009 as the year of uncertainty. We all got knocked off balance last year, in one or perhaps many ways. Almost all of us lost money. Many of us lost jobs... So many of our expectations and assumptions about the world and our lives were erased, if not rewritten on the spot. Our confidence took a blow and we hesitated even to venture a guess about such things as the future of the economy, politics or our nation's two wars.

If 2009 was the year of uncertainty, then 2010 has been the year of ambiguity. We're tired of the uncertainty and ready to move forward, ready for more clarity. But all we seem to get are mixed signals. News reports on one day say the economy is getting stronger; the next day's reports suggest it's weaker. Some say the Obama administration is making at least some progress for the greater good; others say we're

only going backwards as a nation. Here in Charlotte, we say we are stronger because we are not as economically dependent on the banks, but we squint to see what's going to take up the slack.

In some cases, this leads to ambiguity in our personal lives. Some are wondering whether they can make a go of it in Charlotte or should they start out somewhere else? Some here today are starting over in new careers. Others are trying to read mixed signals in personal and family relationships – are things getting better or worse?

And as with Ahaz, we turn our back on God's signs.

God stands by, ready to intervene but we dare not involve God, especially if, like Ahaz, we have exactly been walking closely with God. Or maybe, like Ahaz, we don't want to tempt God, we don't want to ask God for an answer because we may not like the answer we get.

Or, as with Joseph, we try to figure things out all on our own. We don't want to bother God with our little – or big – problems. We concoct our own solutions. Or we wait for them to simply go away. Or, like so many good southerners, we pretend we don't have any problems.

What we see with Ahaz and Joseph is that God doesn't always give us the option of leaving God out of it. It's not that God gives us fully written instructions. Most of the time, God doesn't work that way. What God did give Ahaz and Joseph, though, was better. God made them a promise, a promise of new life, a path forward, a way out of no way.

For Ahaz, it was a vision of a young boy to be born, and to thrive and grow to eat curds and honey in a land of plenty. This promise of a new life was an assurance that Judea would be saved from its immediate threat. For Joseph, God promised Emmanuel, the revelation that Mary's son would be the Christ, come to save his people from their sins.

As those who pray the words "thy kingdom come," we live by that same promise. The king we await in these last days of the Advent season of expectation was and is the one who introduced God's kingdom on earth. At once, the words "thy kingdom come" express our trust in the promise that that kingdom has begun and, at the same time, that there is more yet to come, a day of justice, of equity, of peace and a love so deep that it washes away the worst that we can do.

When we were all kids, we learned at an early age the power of a promise. If you promised not to tell your best friend's secret, that was the most valuable thing you could give. God made a promise to Ahaz and to Joseph and to us, "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall name him Emmanuel," God is with us. In that promise God gave the most valuable thing God had to give, God's presence in the world then in Christ and even now in the Holy Spirit.

In these times, when all the world has to offer is ambiguity, that divine promise is more than enough to light our path to the manger this week and all the weeks to come.

Amen.