

Advent 4, Year A

December 18, 2016

Isaiah 7:10-17

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, "Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven." But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test." And he said, "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted. The Lord will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father's house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria."

Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

The year is 735 B.C., and the situation in the Middle East is volatile. Assyria is on the ascendancy, threatening to expand its Empire south into Aram (modern Syria) and down into Israel, and Judah. The King of Israel and the King of Aram agree to unite in a coalition against Assyria. What is King Ahaz of Judah, descendent of King David, to do? Should he join the Aramean-Israelite coalition? Should he submit to becoming a vassal state of Assyria? Or should he remain independent of any alliance, relying only on God?

Several verses before our assigned lesson, God says to the prophet Isaiah, "Go out to meet [King] Ahaz... and say to him, 'Take care, and be calm, have no fear and do not be fainthearted...'"¹ The Lord God tells Ahaz not to be shaken by political saber-rattling, but rather to trust in God. God is even willing, as we read in the passage assigned today, to give a *sign* of his power to Ahaz. "Ask a sign of the Lord your God," Isaiah tells Ahaz; "let it be deep as Sheol

or high as heaven. [You name the sign, Ahaz! God will give you whatever sign you choose!]"

God is inviting Ahaz into a relationship of trust. "Trust in me," God says in effect; "I will care for you and the people of Judah." But Ahaz places his bet on political might rather than on God. He *refuses* to ask a sign from God, giving as an excuse the pious-sounding pretext of "not wanting to put God to the test." Ahaz puts his trust instead in political and military power, and secretly makes a pact with Assyria (2 Kings 16:7), sending messengers to the Assyrian king to say, "I am your servant... Come up and deliver me..." Ahaz asks the *Assyrian king* to "deliver" him, using the same Hebrew word the Bible uses to describe how *God* "delivered" the people from slavery in Egypt. (Exodus 14:30) The irony is palpable.

And how often do you and I do the same thing! Threatened by forces (real or imagined) closing in on us from all sides, we panic. We have over-extended ourselves financially, or have over-committed ourselves, or have procrastinated until it is too late, or are so worried about a person or situation or our own health that we lose sleep. What do you do? Where do you go?

All too often, if you are like me, you turn to your own human resources – try to take tighter control of the situation, work harder. Or perhaps you try to avoid *thinking* about it, busy yourself with distractions, or take a Somnux, eat some comfort food, go to bed and try to forget about it. All too seldom do I – and perhaps you – take the problem to God, and lay it at God's feet. "No, Lord," we say in effect, echoing Ahaz, "I won't ask a sign. I won't bother you. I'll handle this myself." I do it all the time; and perhaps you do, too.

You see, we *understand* Ahaz! We understand wanting to fix things by ourselves, wanting to keep **ourselves** in the driver's seat, rather than giving control of our lives over to God – for God may not work things out the way *we* want them to be worked out.

Look at Joseph in our Gospel. Everything is going along smoothly in his life. Engaged to a nice girl, things going well in the carpentry business, a righteous man in good relations with the rabbis, and then—all of a sudden, Mary is pregnant! What did Joseph do to deserve this?

If **this** is what happens when God comes into one's life, well then, God, could you please *stay out* of **my** life? I've got my life all planned out here, you see, and if I let you start meddling in my life, it might mess up all MY plans. *I'm* a righteous man, I go to church every Sunday, tithe my income, say my prayers, do what I think is right. So don't rock the boat, God, by coming into my life right now, okay?

Joseph, we are told, was a “righteous man”, which in those days would have meant following the Commandments and the Torah. The Torah said that if a woman betrothed to a man was found to have been unfaithful, that woman should be *stoned* to death. (Deuteronomy 22:23-24) What is God *thinking*, making Mary pregnant *before* she was married?! Why not wait until Joseph and Mary were **married**, to avoid the *scandal* of this situation?

But God’s understanding of righteousness is different: to our Heavenly Father, being “righteous” is not simply following the letter of the Law; it is being in right *relationship* with Him. And being in right relationship with God, participating in the flow of divine Life, almost *always* brings us into conflict with the values and customs of the world in which we live. It can even bring us into conflict with our understanding of our own religion and our religious traditions! It certainly did for Joseph.

“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.” Will Joseph trust the word of God, and risk the scorn of society and the retribution of the religious leaders when they find Mary delivering a baby *less* than 9 months after the marriage? Besides, how can he even be sure that it *was* an angel coming to him in his dream, and not his own inner voices, or -- as Scrooge thinks when he first sees Marley’s ghost -- something he ate?

“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife...”

“Ahaz, son of David, take care, and be calm, have no fear and do not be fainthearted.” (Isaiah 7:4)

Richard Rohr says, “The only way people can ever be freed from their fears is to be freed from themselves. There is almost a complete correlation between the amount of fear in our lives and the amount of attachment we have to ourselves. The person who is beyond fear has given up the need to control or possess.”² How attached is Ahaz to himself? How attached is *Joseph* to **himself** and to **his** plans for his life? How attached are you and I to **ourselves**, and to **our** plans for our lives? Could *we* hear the voice of God speaking to our hearts? Can we recognize God in a friend, in a stranger, or in an enemy? Or would we rather **not** see God where we don’t *want* to see God, rather not *listen* for God speaking to our hearts? Like Ahaz, would we rather **not** ask for a sign or a word from God because we know it might overturn our favorite prejudices, challenge our cherished customs, upset *our* plans that we are unwilling to let go of?

“Faith,” the letter to the Hebrews says, “is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things **not** seen.” (Hebrews 11:1) Unlike Ahaz, unlike myself (so often), **Joseph** acts in faith—in the assurance of ancient hopes, the

conviction of the trustworthiness of an unseen God. Joseph risks *all* on God, trusting the Holy Spirit moving in *his* life and Mary's life.

Baptist preacher James Slatton writes, "The truth of some things in life we can *only* know by **giving** ourselves to them... There is no substitute for **being** there. *You have to make the journey.* Joseph's Advent waiting is an *active* waiting. He puts himself at the service of the heavenly vision and awaits the outcome."³

He puts himself at the service of God and awaits the outcome.

The message of our lessons this fourth Sunday of Advent is that into the midst of all **our** plans and fears God comes! God comes to us whether we ask for it or not, whether we are ready for it or not. Ahaz refuses to ask for a sign, but God gives him one anyway: "the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel [God with us]." In the midst of all the political upheaval, wars and rumors of wars, the mighty armies of Assyria, Israel, and Aram flexing their military muscles, into the midst of it all the sign is given -- and it is the birth of a helpless baby. A helpless, vulnerable baby.

God comes, often unawares, without waiting for our invitation. How do you and I respond?

Will we, like Ahaz, give lip service to God while really maintaining control ourselves, trusting our imperial egos and the powers of this world? Or will we, like Joseph, let God upset all our plans, and birth his Son into the very heart of our lives, changing everything?

Is that not, after all, the meaning of Christmas?

AMEN

¹ Is. 7:3-4

² Richard Rohr, John Booker Feister, ed., *Radical Grace*, Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1995, p.117

³ *Lectionary Homiletics*, 1998, p. 22 (*emphasis mine*)