

# The Sign of Immanuel

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, good morning again, and welcome to Church of the Advent. My name is Jeff, and I'm one of the pastors here. We're so grateful that you've joined us, especially if this is your first time or if you're new to our church.

Imagine that you go to sleep tonight, and you are awakened suddenly at 2.30 in the morning, and your eyes are trying to focus because the whole entire house is pitch dark. And you realize that the power has gone out inside the whole house. You're alone at home, and everything's dark, and you hear the sound of something rustling downstairs, and you reach for your phone, but you realize that you forgot to charge it before you went to bed, and your phone's dead. And so you get out of bed, and you head down the stairs to the kitchen, and you open the doors to the basement, and it creaks open with a loud creak, and you look down into the darkness of the basement, but you can't see anything.

There's no natural light. There's no windows down there. And as you head down the stairs, you can't see anything, but you can sense the presence of shadows. And what you experience in that moment is fear.

[ 1 : 19 ] Fear. It's anxiety. It's awareness of the unknown, but that the unknown might somehow be a threat. This morning, we come to the fourth and final week of the season of Advent.

And Advent, in the church calendar, is a season that begins in the dark. It begins in the dark. From the scripture passages we read, to the songs that we sing, to the prayers that we pray, to the physical reality of having less sunlight outside and the days ending earlier and having more physical darkness, Advent begins in the dark.

And in the season of Advent, we face the world as it is. We face the darkness of the world and all its suffering and all its grief and all of its injustice. And we also face the darkness within our own hearts.

This is not a season of forced sentimentalism, but it's a season of gospel realism, where we look at the world realistically.

But the beauty of the season of Advent is that the season of Advent doesn't stay in the dark, but that it actually, that there is an ever-growing light, that there is a light that's kindled, there is a light that grows.

[ 2 : 36 ] And part of the way that we try to embody this is in the Advent wreath, that every week we light another candle. And it's the sense that even though we live in the darkness, that we are a people who are part of a story that has ever-growing light.

We don't get to the joy in the light of Christmas without passing through the darkness. And the lectionary passages this morning lead us to confront an aspect of the darkness that we often don't like to think about or talk about, and that's fear.

What is it that makes you most afraid? What is it that gets your heart pounding? What is it that keeps you up at night and makes your palms sweat? Maybe if you're a young kid, maybe it's the fear of going to a new school and entering into a classroom that you've never seen, and seeing a teacher you've never seen, with students you've never seen.

And you wonder, will the other kids like me? Will I have friends? Or will I be bullied and picked on as the new kid? If you're a teenager, maybe you're worried about grades at school, and you're wondering, will I do well enough this year so I can get into the classes next year I need to so that I can get my application ready for college so I can get into a good college?

Will I finally have a group of friends that finally accepts me for me, or will I always feel like I'm on the outside of some friend group? For some of you, maybe it's the fear surrounding your job.

[ 4 : 06 ] Will I do well enough to advance in my company? Will I be able to move forward? How long will I feel stuck? Will I be able to keep this job?

Do people at work like me? Is my boss disappointed in me? Maybe it's the fears around being a parent. Are we doing enough? Are we reading the right books?

Are we following the best advice? Are they going to the right school? Are they in the right program? What if they rebel when they get older? What if we don't have enough money for college? Maybe it's the fears about being single.

What if I never get married? What if I never have kids? What if I never find that special someone? What if I'm alone for the rest of my life? Maybe it's the fears of the future. Maybe it's worrying about a mom or a dad or a grandparent getting sick.

What if they're not okay? What if we lose someone we love? What if I get injured or sick and I can't work and provide for my family? It's that feeling that you get when you're waiting for test results from the doctor and you get a call and you see that it's the doctor's number that pops up on your screen.

[ 5 : 16 ] And it's that feeling in the pit of your stomach that you feel right before you press the button to answer it. And you wonder, what are they going to say? What is the news going to be?

And how is my life going to change? Fear. Fear. All of us are afraid of something. Many of us are afraid of more than one thing. The question is, what do you do with it?

How do you process it? How do you deal with what you're afraid of in life? Where do you go to for security? Where do you go to for protection? Where do you go to for safety and comfort?

Fear is a prominent theme in our lives and it's also a prominent theme in the passages that we just read. Here in Isaiah 7, in Matthew chapter 1, we see people who are in fear, but we also see something else.

We also see that there is good news about fear in the Advent and Christmas season. And we find it in the sign of Emmanuel. Both Isaiah 7 and Matthew 1 talk about Emmanuel, which means God with us.

[ 6 : 23 ] And in Emmanuel, it's in Emmanuel that in the midst of the darkness of our fears, that we find true security, true assurance, true comfort, even amidst our darkest fears.

So we're going to look at, from Isaiah 7 and Matthew 1, we're going to look at a couple of things. We're going to look at, in the midst of our fears, in the midst of the darkness of our fears, the allure of worldly security and the promise of true security.

The allure of worldly security and the promise of true security. But before we do that, let's pray. Lord, we acknowledge that you are in our midst and we ask that your Holy Spirit would speak to us. Lord, this morning, all of us are in need of assurance and comfort and hope and security with what we're facing and what we're afraid of.

Lord, would you come speak to us now, we pray. Amen. Amen. So first of all, let's look at the allure of worldly security.

[ 7 : 24 ] The background scene in Isaiah chapter 7, there's a lot going on, but the background scene is that there is an impending military invasion. The kingdom of Assyria was the large imperial empire to the north who dominated the region with their military power.

And the king of Assyria was a guy named Tiglath-Pileser III. And you don't need to know anything about him. His name is just intimidating. Like Tiglath-Pileser. That just sounds scary.

And Tiglath-Pileser had great visions to expand his empire and all of the smaller kingdoms in the region feared him. And so this led the northern kingdom of Israel, the northern kingdom of Israel, which had already turned away from the Lord, to form an alliance with the kingdom of Syria.

Not to be confused with Assyria. They're two different kingdoms. It's confusing. But those are two different kingdoms. And so meanwhile, Ahaz is the king in the southern kingdom of Judah.

And he is the king who sits on David's throne. And in theory, he is supposed to be the king who leads the faithful remnant of God's people. In theory, he is supposed to be the king who sits on David's throne, who leads the people of God to follow the Lord faithfully.

[ 8 : 38 ] And Ahaz learns about this newly formed alliance between Israel and Syria. Israel and Syria are preparing to march to Jerusalem and attack it and capture it.

In Isaiah chapter 7, verse 2, it says, This is a powerful image of a king and a people who are shaken with fear.

The news brought fear not only of the military conflict or maybe the loss of political sovereignty, but the fear of the end of David's throne. The northern kingdom had already abandoned the Lord. And if Jerusalem were to be captured and if the Davidic king were to be conquered, then that would likely mean the end of the story for God's people.

And so this is an existential crisis for the people of Judah and for King Ahaz. But it's not an existential crisis for God.

[ 9 : 47 ] God is not shaken. He is the one who sits on his throne and rules over all the nations. He is unmoved. And through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord speaks a word of comfort and assurance and hope to Ahaz in the midst of his fear.

And he says, this impending invasion is not going to happen. I'm not going to let it happen. He says in verse 4 that Israel and Syria, they look like they're a blazing fire, but actually they are two smoldering stumps of firewood.

And in just a few years, they won't even be kingdoms anymore. And so he calls Ahaz to trust him. He says, do not fear. Do not let your heart be faint. You can trust me. You can trust my promises. I'm not going to let the house of David fall. I'm in control. The story of Israel, the story of the Davidic king is not going to end because I'm sovereign, because I'm in control.

I'm not going to let it happen. And he calls Ahaz to respond in faith. He calls Ahaz to trust in his promises amidst his fear. In verse 9, the Lord says to Ahaz, if you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.

[ 10 : 57 ] And so this is a turning point in the history of the people of God. What Ahaz decides to do here will ultimately determine the trajectory of God's people. If he trusts in the Lord's promises, the kingdom will stand.

But if he fails to trust in the Lord, the kingdom will fall. And so what is Ahaz going to do with his fear? How is he going to respond? Will he trust in the Lord and his promises, or will he seek safety and security elsewhere?

And these are questions that are important for us to reflect on today as well. What do you do when you experience fear? What do you do when you're afraid?

Where do you go? Where do you turn? Where do you seek comfort? Where do you seek assurance? Where do you seek security? What are you trusting in to keep you safe and secure from the unknown of the future?

Do you trust in the promises that God has made to you in his word, that he's sovereign, that he's in control? Or do you turn elsewhere?

[ 12 : 01 ] Sadly, as the story continues, we learn that Ahaz turns elsewhere, that he turns away from the Lord to the great king of Assyria. And in 2 Kings 16, we learn and we read that Ahaz sends a message to the king of Syria, and he says, I am your servant and your son, come up and rescue me from the king of Syria and from the hand of the king of Israel.

And he pays him a large amount of gold and silver as protection, and he looks to the king of Assyria, Tiglath-Pileser, to come and rescue him, to come and provide his security.

And so Ahaz secures military protection, but he surrenders his heart. He surrenders his heart. In 2 Kings 16, we read that Ahaz transformed the temple in Jerusalem to be a temple of pagan idolatry. The temple of the Lord was turned into a temple of idol worship. Because you see, the place where Ahaz found safety, the place where Ahaz sought security among his fears, was also the place where he worshipped.

The place that he sought security was the place that he worshipped. But that didn't work in the long run. See, that only replaced old fears with new fears. The second half of Isaiah chapter 7 shows that even though the northern threat had been taken care of, that there were new fears coming.

[ 13 : 28 ] One day, the king of Assyria would come and occupy the land of Judah. The land would be devastated. The people would be impoverished. The people would be stripped of their dignity. And for the rest of the story, from here on out, God's people are going to live under foreign occupation, foreign rule.

From Assyria to Babylon, to Persia, to Greece, to Rome. They're going to live under a foreign power. You know, the security that the world has to offer is often really alluring.

It's really tempting. We're all drawn to various things to help manage our fears. Having a solid 401K, a solid retirement investment account, makes us feel financially secure.

Nutrition supplements, dieting, workout plans, help us to feel safe and secure about our physical health. Newly elected leaders that we voted for help us feel less afraid of the direction of our country.

And all of these things are good things. They can all be received as gifts from God as good things. But they will all fail us as our ultimate sense of security. They will all fail us as our ultimate source of security.

[ 14 : 41 ] How do you know? How do you know if something is your ultimate source of security? How do you know that? How do you identify it? Your ultimate source of security is that thing in your life that you would say, if I have that, if I have that, then I will no longer be afraid.

If I have that, if I have this, then I'll no longer be afraid of my circumstances. If I have this, then I'll no longer be afraid of my future. If I have this, I'll no longer be afraid of what other people think of me. If I have this, I'll no longer be afraid of not having enough. I'll no longer be afraid of failure. I'll no longer be afraid of not being enough. If I have this, then I'll no longer be afraid.

What is that thing for you? How would you fill in that blank? Ultimately, what you are trusting in to deal with your fear, to deal with what you're afraid of, that is ultimately what you worship.

And you might be here and you say, you know, well, Jeff, that's great, but I'm not a religious person. I don't necessarily believe in God. I'm just here. I just found my way here. A friend invited me. But I'm secular, and I think the fact that you worship God is great, but I'm not a worshiper.

[ 15 : 57 ] I'm not religious. Well, listen to the non-religious secular author, David Foster Wallace, one of the best writers and novelists of the 20th century.

David Foster Wallace gave a graduation speech at Kenyon College called This is Water. Some of you may have read it or seen it before. And here's what the secular thinker, David Foster Wallace, says.

He says, In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There's no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice that we get is what to worship.

And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of God or spiritual type thing to worship is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never feel like you have enough.

Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure, and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you. Worship power.

[ 17 : 04 ] You will feel weak and afraid. And you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Worship your intellect. Being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.

But the problem of worshipping at the altar of worldly security, even if you're not, don't consider yourself a religious person, is that worldly security will always end up making you feel more insecure.

It will always replace old fears with new ones. There's a story about John D. Rockefeller that you may have heard before.

John D. Rockefeller, of course, was one of the wealthiest people in American history, became extremely wealthy through founding the Standard Oil Company, and in many ways had a monopoly over the oil industry.

And in the early 20th century, he was known by far as being the richest person in the world. And the story goes that somebody asked Rockefeller one day, and they asked him, how much money is enough money?

[ 18 : 06 ] How much money is enough money? And Rockefeller said, just a little bit more. Just a little bit more. You have the richest person in the world saying, how much is enough?

And the answer is, just a little bit more. I don't have enough. You can be the richest person in the world and not feel like you have enough. Why? Because nothing in this world will give us the kind of security, will give us the kind of comfort, will give us the kind of assurance that we long for.

It can only make us more insecure if we make it the object of our worship, if we make it the center of the orbit of our lives. And so what we need is something better.

What we need is true security. What we need is the kind of thing that allows us to know deep down in our bones that no matter what happens, we're secure, we're safe.

No matter what happens, we'll be okay. No matter what happens, everything will turn out for good. No matter what the future holds. And that is what the sign of Emmanuel offers us.

[ 19 : 12 ] That is what we see here. That is what is offered to us, is true security. True security that actually gives us the kind of comfort that we need in the midst of our fear. So let's look at the promise of true security.

The promise of true security. In verses 10 through 12, the Lord tells Ahaz to ask him for a sign. A sign that would prove God's faithfulness to keep his promises.

But because of his lack of faith, he actually refuses. He refuses because of the hardness of his heart. Now this is the only place in Scripture where God himself tells somebody to ask him for a sign.

This is an incredibly gracious thing for the Lord to do. The Lord longs for Ahaz to trust him with his fears. The Lord longs to be the ultimate source of security for him.

But Ahaz is so enamored. He's so a lord. He's so centered on worldly security. He's so blinded by the sin of his unbelief. That he can't even see.

[ 20 : 13 ] He can't even fathom. That the Lord might be able to give him something better than the king of Assyria can give him. In verse 14, the Lord says, Okay, you don't trust me?

Fine. I'm going to give you a sign anyway. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Emmanuel. He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.

And before he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted. And so the sign that the Lord gives is a child that's to be born.

What do we learn about this child? What do we learn about this sign? Well, we learn that he's going to be born of a miraculous birth. He's going to be born of a virgin. We learn that he's going to be named Emmanuel, which means God with us.

We learn that he's going to be born into poverty. Curds and honey were the food of impoverished people. And we also learn that his life is going to be a timeline for the fulfillment of God's promises.

[ 21 : 17 ] Even while he's still really young, before he is able to know the difference between right and wrong, the threat of Israel and Syria will be over. In only a few years, Ahaz's worst fears are going to be gone.

And the question is, is this fulfilled in Isaiah and Ahaz's day? Or is it fulfilled later on? And the answer is yes.

The answer is yes. There's a partial fulfillment of this promise here in Isaiah chapter 8. There is a child born in Isaiah chapter 8, and within his lifetime, Israel and Syria are defeated.

But none of the other promises here are fulfilled with this child. He was not named Emmanuel. He was not born into poverty. He was not born of a virgin birth.

And so what is partially fulfilled in the birth of a child in Isaiah chapter 8 is fully fulfilled in the birth of a child in Matthew chapter 1. As Joseph is considering how to divorce Mary quietly, because she has obviously been unfaithful before the wedding has actually taken place.

[ 22 : 29 ] As he is considering this, an angel appears to him in a dream and says to him in verse 20, 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, because he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord has spoken by the prophet in Isaiah chapter 7.

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God, with us. This sign in Isaiah 7 that's partially fulfilled in Isaiah chapter 8 is fully and finally revealed in the birth of Jesus Christ.

He's born of a virgin. He's born into poverty. He's called Emmanuel, God with us. And friends, this is not only where we see God's promises fulfilled in history, but this is where we find our true security to face our fears today.

This is where we find security. This is where we find the deep comfort that we need, because it's in Jesus that our deepest fears are driven away. It's in Jesus that our deepest fears are driven away.

[ 23 : 42 ] Do you notice the first thing the angel says to Joseph? Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid. Do you know, did you see, did you notice the first thing that the Lord says to Ahaz?

In Isaiah chapter 7, don't be afraid. Don't be afraid. What is the most common thing that Jesus tells people in his ministry?

What is the most repeated thing that Jesus tells other people? Don't be afraid. What is the most repeated command in all of Scripture? Old Testament, New Testament, what's the most repeated command?

Do not fear. Don't be afraid. The presence of God in Jesus Christ is the absence of fear, because he is the love of God incarnate.

He is the love of God made flesh. 1 John chapter 4 says that there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. It casts it out. And the presence of Jesus is perfect love.

[ 24 : 51 ] And he, out of love, out of his love for us, out of his love for his good creation, he was born into this world to overcome everything that makes us afraid. He was born to overcome everything that makes us afraid.

How did he do it? How did he overcome it? Well, one day, Jesus, the Jesus that was born in Matthew chapter 1, one day, Jesus Christ himself, God himself, would be shaken to his core. He would be shaken to his core as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind. The one who tells us not to be afraid, to not fear, would tremble in the garden of Gethsemane.

The one who is named Emmanuel, the one who is God with us, would be without God on the cross. He would cry out, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Jesus Christ experienced cosmic fear, eternal fear, to make us fully and eternally secure and safe with him.

[ 25 : 59 ] In the cross and resurrection, Jesus overcame that which we should fear most in the world, evil and sin and death. He overcame our worst fears, so that we would be radically and eternally secure in him.

And when you see that that's what he did, when you see that he did that for you, that he did that for you, you can believe him and you can trust him when he says, I'll never leave you or forsake you. I'll never reject you. I'll never condemn you. Nothing in all creation can separate you from my love. Nothing in all creation, neither the present nor the future, neither height nor depth, not even death, nothing can separate you from my love.

and even when you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, even in that place, I am with you.

I am with you. And friends, that is a kind of comfort, that is a kind of security, that is a kind of assurance that the world can't give you. You won't be able to find it in a 401k.

[ 27 : 07 ] You won't be able to find it in a political leader. You won't be able to find it in a family, in a spouse. You won't be able to find it anywhere. Only Jesus. Only Jesus can give you that kind of security.

security. And if you know, if you know that Jesus Christ in His cross and His resurrection has already overcome your greatest fears, if He's already overcome evil and sin and death, and if you know that you're eternally secure in Him, then you know that you can trust Him with all of your other fears, all of the fears that you face day to day, compared to evil and sin and death.

Everything else, everything else is like a smoldering ember. It's a smoldering ember that soon is going to be up in smoke compared to Jesus.

What is it that makes you most afraid? What is it that keeps you up at night? What makes your palms sweat? I want you to imagine seeing yourself in the midst of that fear.

Imagine yourself in the middle of that place, in the middle of that situation. Now imagine Jesus right there in the middle of that situation with you.

[ 28 : 26 ] Imagine Jesus standing right beside you in the middle of that fear. And He's right beside you. And He's looking at you. And He's looking at you with eyes of tenderness grace and compassion and love.

And He says to you, I know. I know. I know. But don't be afraid.

Don't be afraid. I love you. I'm with you. I'm here with you. I'm right beside you. I'm never, ever, ever going to leave you. You are mine.

I love you. Nothing in all creation can separate you from my love. And you can trust me. You're safe. You're secure. Eternally.

Now and forever. Nothing in all creation can separate you from my love. Not even this. Not even this. And you don't have to try to control everything.

[ 29 : 37 ] You don't have to try to manage your fear. You don't have to try to control the situation. Because I'm in control. I hold the universe in the palm of my hand.

I uphold the universe by the word of my power. I'm in control. You don't have to be. You can let go. You can trust in me. Don't be afraid.

Don't be afraid. And friends, that is what Emmanuel means. That's what God with us means.

I actually think that the next sentence after God with us is God is with us. Don't be afraid. God is with us so we don't have to be afraid.

Emmanuel means that all of our greatest fears have already been conquered by Jesus. Emmanuel means that all that we need to face our current fears, we already have in Jesus.

[ 30 : 39 ] Emmanuel means that the assurance that we will one day live without fear, we have in Jesus. So stand firm in your faith in Him.

Friends, don't worship at the altar at the altar of worldly security. Don't let your heart be drawn towards what can't save. Don't let your heart be drawn to something that is simply just going to replace old fears with new fears.

Find true security in Emmanuel. Find true security in God with us and Jesus Christ. None of us know what the future holds, but we know the one who holds the future in the palm of His hands and His name is Emmanuel and He's God with us and He says, I love you, I'm with you, don't be afraid. Don't be afraid. Let's pray. Jesus, thank you that you are Emmanuel, that you came into the world to release us from the power of fear by your very presence, by your very love.

Lord, would you be our comfort, would you be our security, would you be our King, we pray. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

[ 32 : 05 ] Amen.