

The Hope of Immanuel

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Date: 18 December 2016

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[0 : 0 0] passage that we read tonight from the book of Isaiah, something that you often hear every December. It's from the book of Isaiah. We've been in the book of Isaiah the last four weeks.

These are all passages about waiting and about hope. We've titled this series Certain Hope in Uncertain Times. Certainly you get why we call it uncertain times. But I trust today that you will be filled with a certain hope upon looking at this passage, a passage that we hear every December. It makes a special appearance in the Messiah by Handel. Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Emmanuel, God with us. So we think this gives us a lot of hope, God's presence. Why should that fill us with hope? Well, before we get there, we're going to look and see what the whole Bible says about God's presence from the very beginning.

And then we'll see how this passage from Isaiah fits into that history, the history of God saving his people. And then we'll see how we fit into that history of God making himself present to his people.

He's with us. He's right here, more present than we are. So let's talk to him. Let's ask him for help as we look at this passage. Let's pray. Oh Lord, our souls in stillness wait.

Truly, our hope is in you. So light our hearts, illumine our minds as we open up your word. Illumine your scriptures, Lord, so that we can know and learn and grow and know you better. Would you change us, Lord? Would you fill us with hope?

[2 : 0 7] We pray in your son's name. Amen. So whereas it is true that God is present at all times and in all places, when we talk about the presence of God, what we mean here is we're referring especially, we're referring to him being especially present to his people in terms of relationship. He especially reveals himself and communicates himself and gives special blessings to those to whom he is present.

Adam and Eve were the first to whom God was present. He placed them in the Garden of Eden and there he lived in loving relationship with them. Even though God was present throughout all creation, he was especially present to them there. In chapter 3, we read and find him walking in the cool of the garden.

He was especially present to Adam and Eve and he gave Adam and Eve responsibilities. They had a mission, which was to fill the earth with the knowledge of him and his glory by being fruitful and multiplying and by cultivating the garden. And God gave them boundaries as well. In chapter 2, God says, you may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat. For in the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die. But they didn't trust God.

They chose to do the one thing he forbade. And at that point, everything broke, including their relationship to him. And his presence would be a lot different after that.

They were ashamed of God's presence and they tried to hide from him. And God's mission to have his presence known throughout creation was derailed. And so much later, God chooses a family by which to bless all of creation. Abraham was the father of that family.

[4 : 06] And the family would eventually be known as the nation of Israel. When that nation was in slavery in Egypt, God rescued her and entered into covenant with her. They would live in loving relationship to God.

He would give them the same responsibility, reflecting his image to all the nations. And he would give them boundaries. And those boundaries are summarized by what we would call today the Ten Commandments. His relationship to Israel sounds very similar to the one with Adam and Eve in the garden. Listen, in the book of Leviticus, chapter 26, he says, I will turn to you and make you fruitful and multiply you and will confirm my covenant with you.

I will make my dwelling among you and I will walk among you and will be your God. I will be your God and you shall be my people. I'm the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt that you should not be their slaves. How would he make his dwelling among Israel?

Well, after being rescued from Egypt, as they wandered through the wilderness, he would literally pitch his tent in their presence. That tent, a physical tent, was called a tabernacle. Eventually, when Israel settled in Palestine, the tabernacle was replaced by a temple built on a mountain called Zion.

And the deepest chamber of this temple was a place called the Holy of Holies. And that was the place where God's presence especially intercepted time and space and matter. But ever since God rescued Israel from Egypt, his presence was linked with his covenant with them.

[5 : 47] Presence, covenant. No presence, no covenant. Israel would enjoy blessings if they obeyed God and suffer punishment for disobeying. That's what a covenant is. This again from Leviticus 26.

I will destroy your high places and cut down your incense altars. My soul will abhor you. I will scatter you among the nations. And I will unsheathe the sword after you. And your land shall be a desolation.

And your cities shall be a waste. And so we come to Isaiah chapter 7. God's people are now named Judah.

They were Israel, but five-sixths of the nation was carved off in a rebellion. And so the people of God are Judah with the capital of Jerusalem. And they have a king named Ahaz.

And he's afraid because there's two nations that have allied themselves against Judah. Syria and Ephraim. Ahaz is afraid, so he seeks help from the kingdom of Assyria.

[6 : 41] Which is a very interesting ally to make. A very strong ally, but so wicked. So wicked. Assyria is like ISIS and the Third Reich and Khmer Rouge all rolled up into one.

They are nasty. And God says, don't go to them. Don't go to them. Trust me.

Trust me. In verse 11 of chapter 7, God says to Ahaz, ask a sign of the Lord your God. Let it be as deep as Sheol or as high as the heaven. God is saying, I will intersect with time and space and matter to confirm to you, Ahaz, that I am trustworthy.

Ahaz is being given a blank check. And he's refusing to cash it. Well, he knows there are strings attached. Ahaz understands, at least subconsciously, that God lives in covenant with his people.

And so I think he thinks, well, anything you give me, God, that is good, is going to come with a condition, rules to follow, laws to keep, so inconvenient.

[7 : 56] And essentially, he says, I would rather be under the yoke of someone who might flay me alive.

A favorite practice of the Assyrian kings. I would rather be under the yoke of someone who might flay me alive than to submit to you, God. It's easy to pick on Ahaz, but man, that's me.

That's me. I'm looking in a mirror here. And I think you are too. We enjoy the good stuff that comes with being a member of a church or being a Christian, but we don't like the submitting part.

What was the name of that satirical op-ed on the internet the other day? I'm finally ready to completely and totally surrender a small fraction of my life to God.

When we don't trust God, it makes sense to trust our own worst enemy. The root of this problem is that we forget that God truly loves us. All of those things he tells us about who we are and what we are to love and what we are to reject and what to do with our bodies and our money and our time and our relationships and our desires, those are boundaries that are meant to protect us and to provide for us.

[9 : 20] He loves us by giving us those boundaries. But Ahaz has already made up his mind. Going to trust Assyria, not God. God, which means he's entering into covenant with Assyria instead of God.

And he responds with a fake piety. God, I won't test you. I will not test the Lord. He's quoting scripture, trying to be diplomatic with his maker. And this exasperates God's prophet.

And tells Ahaz, you'll be given a sign anyway. This is what's going to happen. A child is going to be born. And his name is Emmanuel. And that's going to remind you of my covenant presence.

Which means I will protect you. And before this child turns three years old, those armies allied against you will be defeated. How embarrassing.

And by the time this child turns 12, those two nations will be completely defeated and wiped out. Good news, right? But the sign of Emmanuel here is two-sided.

[10 : 28] God's presence among them means there are terrible consequences for breaking covenant with him. From this point onward, the kings of Judah will be under the yoke of a foreign king. This is really the turning point of the whole monarchy.

Within a generation, Assyria will sweep down from the north in level 46 of Judah's cities. After Assyria, Judah's oppressor will be Babylon.

And Babylon will finish what Assyria started. Jerusalem will be destroyed. The temple of God will be destroyed. And God's people will be hauled off into exile. With Assyria, Ahaz has taken the tiger by the tail.

And whatever one trusts besides God will devour him. Whatever one trusts besides God will devour him.

We find this to be true, don't we? There's simply nothing in the created order that can satisfy our desires. If we were made to be in relationship to an infinite God, then we were meant to desire him.

[11 : 34] We were made to desire him. Our desires then are infinite and cannot be satisfied with what is finite. And so those things, those possessions, fame, success, people, money, lovers, power, they either let us down or prove to be insufficient, or they just simply start to bore us.

They're never enough. In the end, they devour us. I'm reminded, haunted really, of a letter that someone wrote. His name was Ralph Barton. He was a famous cartoonist for the New Yorker magazine in the early 20th century.

He wrote, I have had few difficulties, many friends, great successes. I've gone from wife to wife and house to house, visited great countries of the world, but I'm fed up with inventing devices to fill up 24 hours of the day.

That was a suicide note. He shot himself in the right temple after writing that. That note is the dark side of what St. Augustine wrote.

He wrote, you have formed us for yourself, God. Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you. God says, let my presence be what satisfies you.

[12 : 52] Let my presence be what gives you confidence. Trust me. Well, Judah's destruction is not the end of the story.

Out of this destruction would emerge a greater opportunity for God to show himself trustworthy. The restoration from captivity. Looking to the future, another of God's prophets, Jeremiah, would say this.

Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. Not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt.

My covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. And I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. Hear God's presence?

I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall each one teach his neighbor and his brother, saying, know the Lord. For they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord.

[14 : 00] For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. For I will forgive my sins no more. For I will forgive my sins no more. This prophecy would be fulfilled in a baby born in Bethlehem.

The child born in Ahaz's time would prefigure another child to be born several hundred years later, in the year 4 B.C. He would be born of a virgin.

He would be known as God with us. Well, because he was indeed God. Made flesh. John would write that in Jesus, God would tabernacle among us.

He would pitch his tent here. John says this about Jesus. To all who did receive him. Who believed in his name. He gave the right to become children of God.

For those children, that's you and me. Jesus would take care of something that we couldn't take care of for ourselves. You see, we still live in covenant with God. The terms are actually the same.

[15 : 01] Did you know that? And we don't keep the terms of those covenant. Like Ahaz, we daily put our faith and trust and confidence in other things besides God.

Things that would devour us. But on the cross, the suffering and death of Jesus, the Son of God says, I will endure the curses that your disobedience merited.

A great exchange takes place. And to you right, the theologian writes about this exchange. He writes this. Jesus, the innocent one. The one person who has done nothing wrong.

The one person of the crimes of which Israel as a whole was guilty. Has become identified with rebel Israel. Who represents God's whole rebel world. With us.

Who are rebels. Unclean. Unfaithful. Unloving. Unfaithful. Unloving. Unholy. So that he may take that sin, as it were, into himself and deal with it.

[15 : 57] Give us instead his holiness as a robe. His purity as a gift and a power. That's the exchange. Do you hear it? He takes our stuff, all of our junk, and he deals with it.

And we get his stuff. This exchange happens because we become united with Christ. We are united with Christ. The New Testament writers speak about us being in him.

It's all over the New Testament. You could say this is how we should primarily understand our life in God. United to Christ.

He could not be any more present then, right? He's not in a tent in the desert. He's not in a temple on a mountain. But he's united to us.

This is where we find ourselves today. In the history of God making himself present to his people. And it's the fulfillment of God with us. God is closer than close.

[17 : 03] And we could spend a year exploring the ramifications of being united to Christ. We'll just briefly touch on two.

The first is our position. The second is our prayer. And when I say position, I'm talking about status. Our identity. We've talked about a great exchange taking place.

Christ getting our stuff and we get his. And being united to Christ, we get his position. His status. First born son of God.

First born here doesn't mean chronologically born first. It means position within the family. We are God's favorite child. You are God's favorite son.

You are God's favorite daughter. We are all God's favorite child paradoxically at the same time. This forms our primary identity, right?

[18 : 08] You are who God says you are. You are not who the trolls say you are. You are. Your identity isn't in your job or your job status or lack thereof.

It's not in your health or your illness. It's not in your victories or your struggles. But it's as God's favorite child. There's confidence.

There's trust. The king is our dad. And so we can go to him with anything that we need or want. In prayer.

We approach the king. He's our dad. That's the second thing. The second implication that we'll explore of being united to Christ. It's how we pray.

So we know God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In being united to Christ, the Holy Spirit indwells us. God is closer than close.

[19 : 09] Which is the name of a book, by the way, which I find very helpful to understand this whole thing. Highly recommend it. A little book called Closer Than Close. Anyway. The Spirit indwells us. We are united to Jesus.

He brings our prayers to the Father. He is our dad. You see, we have entered into this life of the Trinity. The perfect, loving community of the Trinity that has existed in mutual love and affection and praise.

And has existed like that since the beginning of time. And then we find ourselves. And you know, God, when he brought you into his life, he knew what he was getting.

He knew you weren't going to be like this perfectly made, had it all together, no baggage kind of person. He knew you were bringing in plenty of baggage. Right? And that is where he deals with it.

That's where he wants you to express your anger, your bitterness, your fear, your frustration like we did in Psalm 80 tonight. Did you notice that? That's a very honest prayer. That's what our prayers can be like.

[20 : 13] United to Christ. Not afraid. It's a lesson I'm learning lately. Speaking with my spiritual director who's helping me work out this issue I have.

So I was talking to him and I said, Donovan, I could really use your help with feeling anger towards an organization that doesn't necessarily have like a particular face I can be angry at.

Now I understand how to get over anger with a person, right? You do these steps, one, two, three, four, and then over time, like my heart changes and melts. And right.

So what about with an organization? How do I do that? How do I get over this anger or frustration or bitterness? And he says, well, Dan, you sound like typical evangelical.

Like you've taken the right steps to solving your problem and getting it right. But it doesn't sound like you've started at square one. Which is telling God all about your anger and your bitterness and expressing that to him.

[21 : 19] How frustrated you are and hurt. So that's what I've been doing. God, I'm pissed. Why did this happen?

Like why is this organization not being held accountable? Why did, wait, you let this happen, didn't you? I think I'm angry at you. What's going on?

You know what I mean? So I've been able to express those emotions to God. And even so, like I feel my heart melting. Ask me in a few months how it's going.

But I think that also helps us wrestle with the things in the world that we can't change. And one of those situations, as you know, it's probably for you.

Syria. I don't know if you've seen videos from what's going on in Aleppo right now. Children being made orphans. Wives being made widows.

[22 : 19] There's nothing we can do about it, it feels like. Who do we get angry against? Well, if we're united to Christ, if we're welcomed into that perfect fellowship of the Trinity, let's bring that into there.

Let's express to God. God, why are you letting this happen? What's going on here? This is wrong. Do something. Do something. Intersect time and space and matter and protect these people.

We can talk to God like that. Because we're his children. He's fully accepted us and loves us. He's fully present to us. It's a great place to be.

Now, God has asked in chapter 7. He asks Isaiah. He tells Isaiah. Ask for a sign. A sign to prove my trustworthiness.

And God doesn't require Ahaz to make this abstract leap of faith. God is willing to intersect with his world of space and time and matter. According to scriptures, God has always done so.

[23 : 34] Wouldn't that be great? If he could do that in our day. Like right here. For you. For me. Why doesn't he do that? I mean, it would be super encouraging, right? If he would somehow intersect with our space and our time.

If he would somehow communicate to us like physical stuff that he's really here. Elizabeth knew what I was talking about.

That's right. He does it every week. He does it every week here. He does so for us tonight. He prepares for us this meal. And in the bread that we eat. And in the wine that we drink.

He is truly present. This just gets better and better, doesn't it? Here he communicates his love for us. And strengthens and confirms our faith.

So as you come forward for communion tonight. As you're waiting in line. Come in expectation. Come as God's favorite son. And his favorite daughter.

[24 : 37] Come expressing your joy. Your fear. Your doubt. Your gratitude. God is giving you a sign. He is with you. He's Emmanuel. In the name of the Father and of the Son.

And of the Holy Spirit. Let's pray. Let's pray.