

Sign, Son, Saviour

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[0 : 00] Isaiah chapter 7 and verse 14. Isaiah chapter 7 and verse 14. Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign.

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and be a son and shall call his name Emmanuel. It seems almost difficult to believe that today is the first Sunday of Advent.

It seems only yesterday when we took down our trees at the end of last year. The COVID-19 pandemic has made this year feel so short in one way and so long in another.

Remember, the first Christmas tree I saw this year was up in someone's house in Scottsdale on the 8th of November. That's three weeks ago today.

Obviously, with all the bad news in 2020, this family wanted to brighten up their lives with some good news. And the advent of Jesus is just that, good news.

[1 : 10] Whether digital or physical, as Professor Leach reminds us, Christmas is not cancelled. Christmas cannot be cancelled, for it celebrates the incarnation of the Son of God, the birth of the Divine Child, the coming of Jesus.

Now, over the course of this Advent, I want us to build up to and celebrate Christmas in the company of the prophet Isaiah.

He lived 600 years before Jesus was born, and yet he saw that birth with greater clarity than many do today. He understood who that child really was, and the difference that child would make to a sinful world, lost in loneliness, darkness, guilt, grief, and shame.

I want us to begin today with this verse. This verse, which is perhaps the most famous of Isaiah's prophecies concerning the birth of Jesus.

The Lord himself shall give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and call him Emmanuel. Quoted as it is in Matthew 1, verse 23, Isaiah's prophecy stands tall and bright throughout the ages, lifting the gloom of the 2020 pandemic, and brightening our hearts with the promises of Jesus and his gospel.

[2 : 44] Now, there are three elements of this prophecy I want to draw your attention to this morning. First of all, a sign.

The Lord himself will give you a sign. Then a son. The virgin shall conceive and bear a son. And lastly, a savior.

And shall call his name Emmanuel. First of all, then, a sign. A sign. Now, those to whom Isaiah was speaking at the time were in a very dangerous situation.

The dominant superpower of the day was the vast Assyrian Empire. And against the Assyrian Empire stood the king of Syria and the king of the northern kingdom of Israel.

They were desperate for Ahaz's, the king of the southern kingdom of Judah, to join in their alliance against this vast Assyrian Empire.

[3 : 46] And so they invaded Judah to force it into action. Their army marched against Jerusalem, but were not able to stage a successful siege against it.

Nevertheless, as we read in verse 2, when the house of David was told, that's Judah, Syria is in league with Ephraim, that's Israel, the heart of Ahad's and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.

You see, the people of Judah were terrified because they were caught between a rock and a hard place. If they sided with Assyria, they faced destruction at the hands of Syria and Israel.

But if they sided with Syria and Israel, they faced destruction at the hands of the Assyrians. No wonder they're terrified. They're caught between the devil and the deep blue sea.

Even wise King Solomon might have scratched his head at the next step. But God has a message for a terrified Ahad's and the people of Judah.

[5 : 03] He sends the prophet Isaiah to them saying, be careful and be quiet. Do not fear. Do not let your heart faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands.

So gracious is our God, even to a roguish king like Ahad's, that he says, ask for a sign. Ask this.

Ask a sign of the Lord your God. This is a sign that God's word can be trusted, that God will destroy the armies of Syria and Israel and deliver his people from their fears.

This is to be a sign that God is going to save them from the danger that terrifies them. Well, a self-righteous Ahad refuses to put the Lord to the test.

And so in verse 14, this verse begins with the words, well, the Lord himself will give you a sign. Let's get this straight in our heads.

[6 : 06] This is going to be a sign of God's covenant determination to lovingly rescue his people from death and destruction. God has spoken to the prophet and now God will speak again through the giving of a living sign.

It's almost like a double lock promise, a promise spoken and a promise signified. Word and action. And so not only does Ahad have God's word in verse 4, he also has the double lock assurance of the sign in verse 14, that God will not leave his people to death and destruction.

He will save them. And that sign shall be that a virgin shall give birth to a child. And all this goes to show that among many other things, the advent of Jesus is a sign from God.

It's the seal of a double lock promise. It's a sign that God will never leave his people to death and destruction, but rather shall save them from it.

It's a sign of God's destruction, but also a sign of God's destruction of sinners, but his salvation of his people.

[7 : 32] He's promised it to them now, and he gives them a sign of his promise. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are the signs of God's grace, we believe.

So the birth of a child whose name shall be called Emmanuel is an even greater sign, the manger being the divine sacrament of God.

And you know, this in and of itself, if this was all we were talking about today, this would be a most wonderful thing. 2020 has been a hard year for many of us. Earlier in November, we studied a series of four texts of Scripture to reassure the fearful and anxious among us that God really is in control.

In Psalm 23, verse 4, we learned that this year, with all its pandemic restrictions, has led to many of us passing through the valley of the shadow of death.

Valleys in body and mind and soul. For many months, we walked in darkness, never knowing whether these restrictions would come to an end, and the COVID death figures fall to zero.

[8 : 45] And we still don't know. We're no further forward. And what we want to know is the answer to the question, is it all going to be okay?

Is it going to work out at the end of things? Halloween was cancelled. Guy Fawkes was cancelled. But Christmas cannot be cancelled because it's the sign from God that things are going to be okay.

That things really are going to work out. In fact, to put it more accurately, it is the sign that things are already okay.

And that things have worked out. That the virgin has been with child. She's given birth, and his name is Emmanuel. That the sign given in the past is God's promise to us today that everything's going to be okay.

That God is in control. And that we don't need to be afraid anymore. The COVID pandemic may cause us to shake in our shoes, just like the kings of Israel and Syria terrified Ahaz and the people of Judah.

[10 : 03] To use the words of verse 2, we shake as the trees of the forest before the wind of this pandemic. God has given us a sign, the birth of Emmanuel. And so on the basis of the advent of Jesus, he says to us, be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart faint because of this COVID pandemic.

You don't need another sign that things are going to be okay, and things are going to work out. The message of the birth of Jesus is your sign that things have worked out, that God is in control, and that things are going to be okay.

My father was brought up in Aberdeen, and when we were growing up, he would often use the word fash. Fash is an Aberdonian word which means to be anxious, panicky, and fearful.

Aberdonians might say, of someone who is rather losing the plot, that they're fashin'. Whenever I was anxious, and panicky, and fearful as a child, my dad would say to me, dinna fash yourself.

Dinna fash yourself. Don't go worrying. Don't be anxious. Stop panicking.

[11 : 29] I don't know, I dinna ken if there's such a thing as a Doric Bible, but if there was, I guess, that Isaiah chapter 7 verse 2 would be translated, dinna fash yourself. And the reason for it's this, God's going to give you a sign.

The virgin's going to give birth to a son, and his name will be Emmanuel. Sign. Second, a son.

A son. A son. Sometimes we lose a, we use a phrase so often that it loses its meaning, and this is such a phrase. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son.

Rolls off our tongue without us even giving it a second thought. And yet, in its understated starkness, it points to the sign that overcomes all our fears and anxieties as Christians.

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son. Now, there are three aspects of this wonderful phrase I want to briefly direct your attention toward, hoping and praying that though we may have heard this phrase 10,000 times before, it would strike us with fresh power today.

[12 : 41] First of all, God's promise here begins with the word behold. Behold. I've said this many times before, but behold really is a very important word, and one of the reasons that we have intentionally moved to the English Standard Version, which translates it well and consistently.

Its use throughout Scripture points to a couple of truths. The first is this, things are not what they seem to be. Behold means things are not what they seem to be.

So the armies of Israel and Syria are poised to attack Jerusalem and to all intents and purposes, Judah appears either to be squeezed in the vice of the alliance or the vice of the Assyrians.

But behold, things are not what they appear to be. God's working in this situation to bring about His salvation and deliverance. You cannot see the spiritual realm, but if you could, you'd see a God who's perfectly in control of everything.

And the same is true for us in our COVID pandemic today, that things are not what they appear to be, that God is in control and He is working in this situation to bring about His salvation.

[14 : 13] But secondly here, behold is also used in Scripture to draw our attention to the fact that God is at work. As if we might replace it with the words, look closer.

God is at work. So instead of reading behold, the virgin shall conceive, read, look closer. God is at work. The virgin shall conceive. It's the difference between glancing at something and staring at something.

Don't glance at the stable in Bethlehem and then go back to worrying about the COVID pandemic. Rather, stare into the eyes of the child born in Bethlehem and you'll see God at work reconciling the world to Himself.

Behold, things are not what they seem to be. God is at work. Stop and stare. They're not going to tell you this on the one o'clock news, but behind the year 2020 is the loving sovereignty of a God who knows just what He is doing with us and calls upon us to trust Him.

But then in the second instance here, consider how ridiculous it sounds, how insane it sounds, that a child being born is the answer to all the problems of our world.

[15 : 46] How ridiculous that sounds. Judah faces invasion, Jerusalem faces destruction, and rather promise armies and military assistance God promises.

A baby. What on earth is any child going to do to change the terrifying situation the children of Judah are facing? You might as well send a snail to do the work of a man.

How is the weakness of a child possibly going to overcome the power of this world's armies and superpowers? When you think of a baby, you automatically think, cute.

But cute ain't a word on the battlefield. You might as well send a child into battle with a water pistol. Or to put it another way, you might as well send a shepherd boy to do battle with a Philistine giant.

You might as well send a little boy with five loaves and two fish to feed a crowd to feed a crowd of 5,000. You might as well send an apostle with significant physical weaknesses, what he calls thorns in the flesh, into the mission field to found a church as God did with the apostle Paul.

[17 : 08] The late, great Dr. Jim Packer wrote a book in his last few months of life with the amazing title Weakness is the Way.

Weakness is the Way. That God uses the weak things of the world to shame the strong, the foolish things to shame the wise, that he even uses a humble child born in a stable in Bethlehem to turn the world upside down.

This is the economy of God for you, that the ridiculous prophecy of a child born should both be the sign of God's sovereignty and salvation.

But God's weakness will defeat human strength and the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men. And then in the third instance, I want you to notice and take very special notice of this.

The birth of this child shall be miraculous. Miraculous. It shall be a virgin who conceives and gives birth. This shall be a conception unlike any other which has ever happened or ever will happen.

[18 : 25] Not a freak event, not a one in a billion, but a genuine miracle impossible to reproduce. You'll know that females contain X chromosomes only and males both X and Y.

There are many natural cases of virginal conception in the lower animal world where a female conceives female, not should we add in the higher vertebrates. But there has never been a case, nor can there ever possibly be a case, where a female conceives male because the female lacks the Y chromosome.

So what we have here is the miraculous. Earlier, using the word behold, we agreed things are not what they seem to be. God is at work.

If you want further proof of this, look no further than the blessed virgin in whose womb is conceived a child, she gives birth to a son. In the early to mid-20th century, a furious theological battle was waged between those from a conservative perspective like ourselves who held tenaciously to the truthfulness of the virginal conception of Jesus and those perhaps of a more liberal background, if I can use that term theologically, who were happy to concede that perhaps Mary wasn't a virgin after all and that it didn't really matter.

What was at stake in this battle was the soul of Christianity itself? For if conservative evangelicalism had given on this point, it would have called into question the authority of Scripture, the suitability of Jesus as the perfect mediator between God and man, and well, basically the whole gospel.

[20 : 21] Make no mistake, this is a miraculous event unworthy of our tenacious belief. Jesus was conceived in and born of a virgin.

Such a thing is impossible. It gives weight to these dual issues of behold and the implication of a child being sent to save his people and not a mighty army bedecked in heavy armor.

This is the sign. The sun's the sign. And the sooner this strikes us with freshness, the better this Advent season.

Let the virgin concede and she give birth to a son. Bethlehem's stable is the sign of God's sovereign salvation over COVID, over death, over even our sin.

Lastly this morning, we've looked at the sign and then the sun. We want to look at a savior, a savior, and shall call his name Emmanuel.

[21 : 36] In the history of name giving, there has never been a greater or more important name given to a child than that which was given to this child born of the virgin, the child whose conception and birth is the sign of God's sovereign victory over all his enemies and his covenant love toward his people.

Now all of us know that the name Emmanuel literally means God with us. God with us. When his people's backs are up against the wall, God is at work.

No, more than that, God is with them. Yes, even there. Now over the years we've talked many times about what the name Emmanuel means.

In fact, 17 times. One for every Christmas I've been your minister. So I want to do something a little bit different today and give you the perspective of the early church fathers on the name Emmanuel.

Emmanuel. Many women very different from us who lived over one and a half thousand years ago in the ancient Middle East and in North Africa and yet having this in common with us.

[22 : 55] That they worshipped and glorified, that they had faith in and they trusted Emmanuel, this child born in Bethlehem.

One group of church fathers interpreted the name Emmanuel in what is called a higher sense. A higher sense.

Such church fathers as Irenaeus and Tertullian insisted that God with us means first and foremost God becomes man.

God becomes man. And they wanted to speak and they spoke very well of how as Emmanuel God understands us and shares in our human experience. As Emmanuel God faced the hatred of his enemies and the pressures of violence just as surely as the people of Judah are facing them here in Isaiah 7.

And this is certainly most true and a very precious promise from the word of God that our great high priest has been tempted in every way such as we are yet without sin. that he shares in all infirmities and carries all our sorrows.

[24 : 08] We might think mistakenly that first century Palestine was pandemic free but there were no viruses which could kill people back in the first century but we'd be wrong.

If a person was fortunate enough to live past infancy and not a lot of them did they faced a thousand diseases and human afflictions which could kill them.

I cut my cut my knuckle earlier this week on a bike chain. Back in the first century before there were such things as antibiotics and ointments this could have killed you.

Jesus understood only too well the dangers of human illness. In a world with no antibiotics a cut like this could kill let alone a full blown epidemic of disease.

Oh yes understand this well Emmanuel knows what it's like to live through a pandemic. But then perhaps we think that he doesn't know what it feels like to be locked down isolated and alone.

[25 : 25] He most certainly does. the point is that for those church fathers who held to this higher sense as Emmanuel God shares in our humanity yes and there's blessing for that in this Advent season.

The sign is that of God's oneness with us and for us in this pandemic of God's solidarity with us in this horribly restrictive lockdown we face.

You're not going through this alone for behold this is the sign of God's presence with you the child Emmanuel whose birth we celebrate at Advent.

But yet another group of church fathers this time led by Jerome interpreted Emmanuel in what we call a lower sense whilst not denying the higher sense they wanted to focus more upon what this child son of the blessed virgin shall achieve namely he shall protect deliver and save his people.

In truth both senses higher and lower work well together with the first focusing on God sharing humanity through Emmanuel and the second focusing on God saving humanity through Emmanuel.

[26 : 50] Who is this child to be born? He is God with us the God who shall do battle with all our enemies and destroy them the God who will rescue his people from the smoldering firebrands of Israel and Syria and the fierce anger of Assyria also.

God who shall rescue us to the cross from our sin from our death from the devil himself. Yeah I know earlier I said that it sounds ridiculous that the birth of Jesus could be the answer to all the problems of the world but what if that child to be born is God's warrior king who's going to go to battle against our fiercest foes against death the final enemy against the devil our fiercest enemy and against the righteous judgment of our sin our surest enemy about the essence of the lower sense in which Jerome and his ilk interpreted the sign of Emmanuel God is promising that he himself will take the field against all our enemies and that he will defeat them that he will be victorious over them and save us from their burning anger both higher and lower sense of the name

Emmanuel worked together especially as we move from the cradle in Bethlehem to the cross outside Jerusalem for there Emmanuel God with us gave himself for us to take away our sins and conquer all our enemies the father of lies the devil who inspired the enemies of Judah to raise up their banners against the people of God was defeated once and for all by the child born of the blessed virgin and crucified to destroy death and win life for all who will believe in him this side is the son the son is the savior this is the first Sunday in Advent an Advent like no other where you're going to be in the company of no no less a figure than the prophet Isaiah he calls us he sounds to us through the ages see the sign of the son born of a virgin see the sign and put your faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ today that's the best of all ways to celebrate Christmas