

Third Sunday of Advent (Lessons & Carols) 2024

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Preacher: Rev. Daniel Avitan

[0 : 00] It's not a very common thing at Christmas time to talk about ancient geopolitical battles.

It's not exactly a festive thing, is it? And yet, Isaiah chapter 7, which will be our text that we're looking in, is precisely that. It is with this backdrop that we will see the promise of the son being born of the virgin.

His name will be Emmanuel. This is the context that this will be declared. So before we continue any farther, let us take a moment and ask the Lord's blessing at this time. Lord, thank you for the sweet, wonderful, beautiful, and sure promises that you have made to us through your prophets in your word.

We pray that this morning, even though that they are written not just centuries, but millennia in the past, that they will be so fresh to us this morning and minister to us by your Holy Spirit.

And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. What happens to you when panic sets in? When plans don't go right? When situations turn south, and you know that real repercussions set in.

[1 : 22] What do you do? Who do you turn to? What is your thought process? Do you have a thought process? Or maybe the animal instinct kicks in, and you try to figure out what to do, and you end up doing things you never thought you'd do, going to people you never thought you'd go to, calling on the name of different saviors that you'd never call on in your life.

The past three weeks, the past two weeks and this week, this Advent season, we've been reading through the book of Isaiah and looking at some of the prophecies that Isaiah made, that the Lord made through Isaiah, centuries and centuries and centuries before Jesus came on the earth, but concerning him, the Messiah.

And these prophecies were written in a very tumultuous time, not exactly a warm, festive holiday season, but a season in the life of Israel that was rife with problems, that saw strife and warfare and bloodshed be the constant in Israel's history.

Israel's history was a giant mess. So over 700 years before the Christmas story, a calamity falls to the Middle East. It's a bit of a pattern, it would seem.

The Assyrian Empire, it was the superpower of the day, whose kingdom spanned from modern-day Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Iran, Kuwait. It was a huge empire, just preceding the Babylonians, if that helps kind of situate it in your historical chronology.

[3 : 02] They threatened any small country or kingdom that faced them. The Assyrians weren't just an empire with global aspirations.

They were also incredibly cruel. History tells us that the Assyrian Empire would have made Hamas and the Taliban blush. They were horrendous, horrendously cruel people.

Their brutality was known across the land. And it's not as though they showed up while Israel was a strong, united force.

It's not like Israel was at the high point of their history. When Assyria comes, Israel, this land that God and these people that God declared his own, had been divided.

The northern kingdom, the ten tribes of the north, divided from the two kingdoms in the south, the kingdom of Judah. Once again, this season in Israel's history was one giant mess.

[4 : 04] So to secure their survival, the kingdom of the north, of Israel, they had since left the true worship of the one true God, and they sought to align themselves with another regional power to take over Judah, install a puppet king, so that they could have a fighting chance against this Assyrian army, this Assyrian empire.

This is a bit of a background to our chapter of Isaiah 7, because it is with this background that we hear about this king named Ahaz.

Ahaz the king. Ahaz was the king of Judah, but unlike other kings of Judah, he was more like a king of Israel, which was to say that he was just as horrendous, but in a different way as the Assyrians. He chose not to follow the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but rather to do whatever was expedient for him to maintain power and to survive.

Morals and true worship be damned. He would do whatever it would take, and that's exactly what he would do. So history tells us about Ahaz, 2 Kings chapter 16, that he sacrificed even his own son to foreign gods.

[5 : 30] This man was unhinged, and he was supposed to be the leader of Israel, but he was leading them not to God, but away from God. So what will he do?

Assyria, this superpower, is on his doorstep. The northern kingdom with a regional power located in Damascus has teamed up to try to overthrow him.

Would he turn to the Lord? Would he trust in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Or would he continue on with his pattern of finding whatever worked to deal with the problem at hand in the most expedient way?

Ahaz is going to ask some questions that I think we are going to ask as well, if we are honest as we dive into Scripture and take an honest, hard look at our own lives.

What do we do when panic sets in? When our prospects have dwindled, when our situations look bleak, what will we do?

[6 : 35] Will we trust in God? Will he do anything? More than that, is the God of the Bible, I mean, we pay lip service to him on Sunday, but does he actually exist?

I mean, this is a decent community, so maybe we're here for the community and not so much the God that the community is formed around.

Does he exist? And if he exists, does he care? These are questions Ahaz is asking. And I think we ought to ask as well. So as we get to Isaiah chapter 7, with those questions as are in the backdrop, I think Isaiah 7 will answer a giant and emphatic yes to those questions, that God, he truly does exist and he truly does care, and all we need to do is call upon him.

He is not far, but he is close. So we'll pick up the story, Isaiah chapter 7, verse 3, where we find Ahaz inspecting the water supply, and it's presumed that he's doing so in preparation to an impending siege.

Jerusalem's a bit of a weird city in the ancient world because it doesn't have a natural water source. So here Ahaz is making sure that they have enough water to withstand a possible siege on their city.

[8 : 04] And then Isaiah comes to him, and this is what we read, chapter 7, verse 3. And the Lord said to Isaiah, Go out to meet Ahaz, you and Sherrod Jashub, your son, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the washer's field, and say to him, Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands.

He's talking specifically about the two kings, the king of Israel in the north, and then this regional king in Damascus. Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands.

But the fierce anger of Rezin in Syria and the son of Ramalia, because Syria with Ephraim, Ephraim is like another name for Israel, and the son of Ramalia as devised evil against you, saying, Let's go up against Judah and terrify it and let us conquer it for ourselves and set up the son of Tabeel as king in the midst of it.

Verse 7. Thus says the Lord God, It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass, for the head of Syria is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is Rezin, and within 65 years, Ephraim will be shattered from being a people, and the head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is the son of Ramalia.

If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all. What's happening here? The prophet encourages the king not to judge the situation that he sees at hand with his own eyes and with his own reason, but looking at the situation through the eyes of God.

[9 : 49] And what is God saying the situation is? These two threats, they're nothing. They're a smoldering stump. There's no power in them.

I'm the Lord your God, and in fact, Damascus will be destroyed, Ephraim in the northern kingdom, they will cease to be a god. Don't trust in whatever fortifications you can make or alliances you can create.

Trust in me. Now, if I'm Ahaz, I would say that I'm not sure I can trust in the Lord when two armies are descending upon me.

Nevertheless, the call of the prophet, which is the call of the Lord, is an invitation for Ahaz to trust in him, into a life of faith. To not live a life based on mere circumstances.

To not live on a, to live a life based on social media trends, on foreign elections, on foreign wars, on Bank of Canada press conferences, on inflation, on social fears, on whatever it may be that seems like a real serious threat to your life.

[11 : 04] I think the call to Ahaz here is the call to us. And the Lord is saying, listen, trust in me. See life, see situations, see the calamities through my eyes.

Not the news, not social media, not the chatter at work, but through my eyes. Trust in me. And it's an interesting bit about faith here.

Because we see it's not necessarily a call to ignore the situations that will affect us, but rather to trust in the one who transcends, and therefore is greater than the problems at hand, no matter how big they may be.

Life is difficult, and the life of faith isn't a life that is free from difficulty, but it is a life of trust in the one true God who is truly bigger than whatever faces us.

And we also see here that it's also this call to trust in the Lord in this life of faith is a call to repentance from faithlessness. Scripture calls faithlessness sin, which is quite the statement, because I do a lot of things personally without faith.

[12 : 25] A lot of my thinking, a lot of my planning, surprisingly as a minister, does not include inviting the Lord into every decision and aspect. Nevertheless, what the Lord is doing here is calling us, Ahaz and us, into a life of repentance, of our faithlessness.

So, it's important that we understand this, because Ahaz isn't just, like I mentioned before, a run-of-the-mill king of Judah. He is, like, the worst king of Judah that has ever existed.

He is supposed to be a descendant of King David, and if you know anything about the biblical story, King David is the king after God's own heart. In fact, the Messiah himself will come from King David's line.

King David was the one who would lead the people into worship, proper worship. However, this descendant of the Davidic line, Ahaz, like I mentioned before, he is sacrificing his own son to foreign gods.

Ahaz, and yet, and yet, the Lord, knowing full well who he is conversing with, invites him to trust in him.

[13 : 41] If this is not a beautiful example of God extending mercy and grace to those that do not deserve it, there is, there is, then an example does not exist.

And not just once does he extend this invitation to Ahaz, but a second time. So if verse 3 to 9 is the first invitation to trust in him, verses 10 and 11 is the second.

And let's read this, verses 10 and 11. Again, again, the Lord spoke to Ahaz, ask a sign of the Lord your God, let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.

We'll pause there. You catch that? The Lord is ready to stop at nothing, to excite and to foster faith in this wayward man.

The Lord knows the brokenness in him and his propensity to sin and his history of sinning. And yet he says to him, listen, ask a sign.

[14 : 41] Let me, let me prove myself to you and it can be anything. From the depths of hell to the heights of heaven, there is nothing that I won't do to prove myself to you.

This is a God who meets somebody in their feebleness. Does not say, get your act together and then come to see me. I will meet you where you are at. In your sin, in your faithlessness, in your brokenness.

The God of Scripture is not a far off God. He is a God that is close. But Ahaz, he has this track record of making these pragmatic decisions, of jettisoning morality and loyalty for personal gain and political survival.

So what will he do with this offer? So much depends on his decision. Remember, this isn't just a personal decision that Ahaz is making. That just affects him. The entire kingdom is, I mean, he is responsible for the entire kingdom.

What will Ahaz say? What will he do? Look with me in verse 12. But Ahaz said, I will not ask and I will not put the Lord to the test.

[15 : 56] It's an incredible response because, you know what, it's actually a very biblical response. Throughout the Scriptures, God continually says, don't put me to the test. Who are you to put me to the test?

We have this idea that if only God will do X, then I will believe in him. Or because he hasn't done Y, I'm not going to believe in him. As if God is a pony or a dog that we can train to do a trick if we only give him a treat.

Or a genie where we rub him a certain way, he grants us our wish, and then we forget about him. That's our propensity.

And it would seem that Ahaz here is saying a very godly thing. Verse 12 again, I will not ask and I will not put the Lord to the test.

Remember when Jesus is tempted in the wilderness by Satan, what does he say? You shall not put the Lord God to the test. And yet, this is the Lord's response.

[16 : 59] Verse 13, and he said, oh, sorry, verse, yeah, verse 13. And he said, Hear then, O house of David, is it too little for you to weary men that you weary my God also?

You see, what's happening here is Ahaz is a faithless man and he is shrouding his faithlessness in piety. He is putting on a show. He is acting in a way so that he will appear well-formed and godly, but his heart is turned away from God.

God is, he's inviting him into a life of faith and he's saying, actually, I'm okay. I've got this. I don't need the Lord's help, but you can't say that.

So what does he say? I'm not going to put the Lord to the test. I'm not going to take the Lord's offer. I'm going to continue on in my sin. I'll say this, excuses abound when fear or pride grip our hearts. It's easy to follow the Lord when things seem like they are going really well, but when difficulty comes, when pressure arises and we feel pinched, fear or pride kick in and it's very hard to trust in the Lord.

[18 : 17] But the call here is to turn our face towards him. It's to not tell the Lord what we need, but to cry out to the Lord for the help that we need from him and trust that he will give us what we need in our time of need.

The problem with unbelief isn't just that it disrespects the Lord. It is the one thing that prevents, in a sense, prevents the Lord from doing the very thing that he desires to do, extending forgiveness, mercy, and grace.

We need to receive the Lord's forgiveness. We need to receive his mercy. We need to receive his grace. And the hard heart that is not affected by the work of God himself cannot receive because it is cold and it is hard and it is broken.

More than that, the Lord sees the facade of Ahaz because only God has a window into the soul of all people. One of the things we pray at the beginning of every service, what we pray today, is the collect or communal prayer for purity.

And one of the things, and I mentioned this this morning, it helps us to have the right posture before Almighty God, but it also reminds us that God knows our hearts more than even we know our hearts. What does it say?

[19 : 39] Almighty God unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid. How on earth can you hide from this God?

How can you put on a show to this God? How can you put up a facade and think that it will fool him? You cannot. This is Ahaz's big problem here.

He thinks he can fool the Lord, but he cannot at all. Besides, this is already indicative of Ahaz making up his mind. He has already turned his face away from the Lord.

And here's the interesting thing, not in our portion of scripture, but if we go back to 2 Kings chapter 16, we'll see that Ahaz, he will eventually side with the Assyrians, this brutal regime, and he will travel to pay them tribute of silver and gold.

Where does he get the silver and gold? From the very temple of the Lord. He robs God to pay tribute to a false savior. It is a scandalous thing.

[20 : 43] The Assyrians will go and absolutely crush Damascus, crush them. Problem solved. Ahaz is justified in his decision, but what ends up happening is now he is not free from Damascus and from Samaria, from the Syrian, not Assyria, but the Syrian regional power and the kingdom of Israel.

He's not just free from them, now he's under the thumb of the Assyrians and it is way worse. False saviors will always promise salvation, but you will find that the peace will not fully last and it will be not as far reaching as you would hope for and you are more in bondage after the fact than you were before.

This is the nature of false salvation, of false saviors and it's an interesting bit here because Ahaz will not kind of come to his senses, but what he will do is that he'll continue to persist in this idolatry. He'll go back to Jerusalem and he will rearrange the temple so that it looks like an Assyrian temple because he's concurring favor with the Assyrian king and now he is a subject of the Assyrian god. Wild, a wild story. This is the king of Judah to lead the Lord's people to the Lord and what is happening? He's turning them into Assyrians. Here's an interesting thing.

[22 : 21] We talked a bit about faithlessness. Ahaz is not a faithless man because he puts his faith not in the Lord of Israel but in the might and power of Assyria.

He is deceived into thinking that he has bet on the right horse and this is another interesting insight for us. We cannot not be people of faith.

Faithlessness is an interesting concept in the Bible because it refers specifically to the lack of faith we have to the one true God but it doesn't mean that we are people without faith. We have to have faith.

We have to put our trust into things into people. It's just who are we going to put our faith in? What are we going to put our faith in? God has made us so that we would have a relationship with him and we can't turn that off if we look the other way.

We still have that impulse that God-given impulse in our hearts. So here's a question. What is our faith in?

[23 : 28] What is my faith in? Is it like Ahaz where we have a faith but it is in pragmatism? Things that will ease our anxiety but only for a moment?

Things that take the pressure off but never deal with the source of the pressure? Does momentary peace now cost us true joy later? Such decisions will result not in a life of flourishing but a life of constraint?

a life of slavery to the things that we thought would give us freedom. True peace will ultimately be fleeting. It's the case with Ahaz and it will be the case with us.

So this should be it, right? Ahaz was given two chances. Presumably he was given more but in our section just two chances. Should be the end of the story. God, he extended mercy.

Ahaz said no. Okay, too bad, so sad for Judah. Too bad, so sad for Ahaz. It should be the end of the story except that it's not because the Lord, he says, listen, Ahaz, name the sign and I will give it.

[24 : 38] Ahaz says no and then the Lord says this in verse 14. Verse 14, therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Emmanuel.

Israel completely turning its back from the Lord. Judah completely turning its back from the Lord. The entire world turning its back to the Lord.

And how does the Lord respond? The Lord responds by saying, I will give you hope not just for the here and now but forever and hope that will not deal with the Assyrian enemy at hand but your enemies for all time.

I will deal not with this regional power that will just be replaced by the Babylonians, that will just be replaced by the Persians and replaced by the Greeks and so on and so on and so on but I will deal with the root cause of your pain and your enemies and your sin.

I will deal with death itself and any demon or devil I will kill. The first reading we did is from Genesis 3 and it's this beautiful picture of in the middle of this horrendous thing that Adam and Eve do, this curse in the garden that causes them to leave Eden.

[26 : 04] In the midst of that, God says, I will send a child that will crush the head of the serpent. It's this wonderful promise and this is what we're seeing in verse 14.

If Ahaz will not trust in the Lord on behalf of his people then the Lord will intervene himself and he will provide a sign. God, like I said a couple weeks ago, God is mercy in the same way that he is love, in the same way that he is grace, in the same way that he extends forgiveness because it is who he is and he can't deny himself and if there's faithlessness in the people of Israel, he will extend mercy and grace all the same.

