

# Jesus and the Presence of God

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] St. John's Shaughnessy Church You would open your Bibles to Isaiah chapter 7 on page 605.

As you do that, I just want to say how grateful I am for the opportunity to have been in England for two weeks at two clergy conferences. And just in case you think it was all hard work, it wasn't.

I got to see some of the Midlands in England and I got to play touch rugby with the young British men there. And the side that I was on won because I was on it.

I am also very grateful to Felix and Dan who remind me every time I come back how much harder it is for them when I go away.

Thank you for the extra work that you've shouldered. And thank you too for all of those of you who've prayed. And I would love to share at length some of the amazing things really God is doing in England.

[ 1 : 3 3 ] And I'll do that in January, not from the pulpit, but from another time. I knew I was back in Vancouver on Wednesday when I opened the Vancouver Sun. And I had an experience of deep ambiguity.

On Wednesday the Sun promised a pull out section called Favourite Christmas Carols. So I turned eagerly to the favourite Christmas carols and there were 26 of them. And I counted six, maybe seven, had any remote bearing on Jesus Christ.

And this was my ambiguous feeling. On the one hand, I deeply resent the fact that the Christian faith is such an embarrassment in our culture and in our media.

That all Christian distinctives have to be hidden. In a school in the local area, there's a competition for children currently to design cards of the season. There's only one proviso.

They're not allowed to put any Christian symbolism on the cards. However, on the other hand, I was also delighted and amazed that six carols made it through.

[ 2 : 4 0 ] In the Vancouver Sun, it was announced to us that Jesus is the heaven-born Prince of Peace. The incarnate deity, born to give us second birth and take us to heaven.

So, I'm left with this double feeling. Now, today we begin the Christian year, as Felix has said, the season of Advent. Where we celebrate how God prepared the world for Christ's first coming.

And how we must prepare ourselves for his second coming. And we do that by turning away from all that displeases him and placing our trust in him. And our text for today, I don't want you to turn to it, is in Matthew chapter 1.

Which says, All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet. Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel. Which means, God with us.

It's going to take us a long time to get to that text. But I promise you, we will come to it before the end of the sermon. Now, we will sing of the miracle of God coming to us this Christmas.

[ 3 : 47 ] We will actually sing it in the service. O come, O come, O Emmanuel. But you need to know that it is a deeply ambiguous thing to say.

There are two very different sides of the promise of God's presence. The promise of Emmanuel has two very different elements to it.

And Matthew wants us to understand that. And that is why he says that Jesus' birth took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken through the mouth of the prophet. Because the promise of Emmanuel comes to us, as you heard in the first reading, from Isaiah chapter 7, verse 14, 700 years before the birth of Christ.

And in order to understand this, Isaiah takes us in three different directions. And the first, he points us towards the beauty of God.

Now, Isaiah served at a time of massive upheaval and change, not unlike our own, where nations' destinies were changed and alliances were moving around.

[ 4 : 57 ] And if you read the book of Isaiah, one of the things that will strike you again and again and again and again and again, that the real issue is not the politics, is not the economics, is not the military and strategic tactics.

The issue is faith in the sovereign Lord, the God, the Holy One of Israel. That is why I just want to look briefly with you at chapter 6, on 604.

These are such familiar words, but let's listen to them again. In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up.

His train filled the temple, and above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings, with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said, Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God of hosts.

The whole earth is full of his glory, and the foundations of the thresholds shook. There is one true throne, the prophet Isaiah tells us.

[ 6 : 03 ] There is one true sovereign, who rules in complete freedom, with no rival to his majesty or his power. And we are fortunate enough to be receiving sometime soon a small sculpture of one of the seraphim, or an image of one of the seraphim.

But the striking thing for me is that here are the creatures who fly in front of the face of God. They see God, and they have seen God since before the creation of the world. And what is the one thing that they choose to sing about over and over and over?

It is this, Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God of hosts. If you acquire a director in heaven, I wonder what words you would choose for the heavenly hymn.

The mercy and loving kindness of God. The power and majesty of God. That's not what they sing. They sing, and at the heart and centre of all the praise of heaven is this, Holy, Holy, Holy.

And I wonder if that's at the heart of the way you and I think about God. I wonder if you want it to be. I must confess to you that for many years I thought about God's holiness only in terms of fear.

[ 7 : 16 ] It seems so distant and so absolute and so remote from me, and I'm so aware of my own unholiness. And I think it is right that God's holiness should threaten us.

Just look at verse 5. Isaiah's immediate reaction is, woe is me, I'm lost, I'm a man of unclean lips. The word lost literally means unravelled. I've seen the Lord, I've seen his holiness, and I'm immediately aware of my own sin.

But Isaiah doesn't end there. And when he confesses his sin and is forgiven by God, he is then commissioned to preach, and at the heart of his message is this, the Holy One of Israel.

That is the name Isaiah uses for God over and over and over. Do you know the hymn that starts, I worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness?

No, it comes from Psalm 29. That holiness is not just something to fear. It is also something that is beautiful and to be loved. Somewhere else in the Psalms, King David says this, One thing have I asked of the Lord that I will seek after, that I will dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.

[ 8 : 28 ] Why? To behold the beauty of the Lord. Isn't that wonderful? In other words, we're not meant to look at God's holiness primarily in terms of how it affects us and makes us feel exposed.

But we are meant to see God's holiness as something beautiful, something wonderful. And I think we get this the wrong way around. We believe in the holiness of beauty rather than the beauty of holiness.

We must never simply equate God's holiness with beauty, but it's vital for us to see. You can't reduce God's holiness to a kind of cosmic bylaw and regulation. It is both a danger and a beauty.

And here is the problem. In Isaiah's day, God's people had invented a false faith. They had taken the world as created and they had turned it on its head and they had decided that what was beautiful was not the holiness of God but the free expression of their desires.

And they were full of religion and they were full of church attendance and their religion bore the name of God, but it was nothing more than disbelief and disobedience. They called right wrong and wrong right.

[ 9 : 40 ] And what does God do? Very interesting. What God does is he gives to his people a sign. And so we move from the direction of beauty, secondly, to the sign of God.

The beauty of God, secondly, the sign of God. And now we come to chapter 7, which Christopher read very ably. It's very difficult when you drop into Isaiah chapter 7, isn't it?

And you come across names like Remaliah and Rezin and Uzziah and Ephraim. But think yourselves fortunate. You look at chapter 7, verse 3.

One of Isaiah's sons was called Shear Jashuv, which means a remnant shall return. And if that's not good enough, chapter 8, verse 3, his next child was called, all together now, Mahershalal Hashbaz.

That would make a baptism very long, do you think? Well, now let me just tell you what's going on here. It's not difficult. Ahaz is the king of Judah and he has a big problem.

[ 10 : 46 ] This is the moment of crisis for the people of Israel. In fact, Ahaz has two problems. The first one is that the two nations, immediately north and northeast, want to invade his country and take it over.

But that's not the big problem. The big problem is that behind those two nations, there is a huge nation called Assyria, which has all the military might and muscle of the day and they also want to come down and take over.

And God sends Isaiah the prophet to speak to the king, to tell the king this, don't make military alliances, but trust in my word.

Don't take things into your own hands. Again, Isaiah has to say to him, the issue is not politics, it's not military might, it's whether you will trust God.

Just look at 7.4 for a moment. This is what Isaiah is to say to the king, take heed, be quiet, do not fear, do not let your heart be faint.

[ 11 : 44 ] Or down in verse 9, the second half of verse 9, if you will not believe, surely you will not stand or be established. The issue Ahaz, King Ahaz, is are you going to trust God's word and God's promise?

It's an amazing promise. But there's one thing, one thing much more, verse 10, 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 says, I will not ask, I will not put the Lord to the test. This is one of the few times in all of scripture I know that God offers to give a sign and what an offer it is.

God will stop at nothing. He says, it will be as deep as Sheol, the place of death, or as high as heaven itself. Critical moment for Ahaz.

Can I trust the word of God? Can I risk my life on it? And sadly, Ahaz does what so many kings before him has done.

[ 12 : 51 ] He hides behind pious words. He says, oh, I'd never dare demand a sign from God. Despite the fact that God invited him to give a sign, to call on for a sign, Ahaz does not even want to believe.

You see, Ahaz looked at the path of faith, the way of faith, and it looks so vulnerable and so embarrassing next to the military might of Egypt just down the road. What possible help can faith be faced with the real life problems of survival?

Oh, so much easier to turn around and believe in the power of Egypt than the power of God. And Ahaz created a false faith because he trusted in what he could see and not in the word of Yahweh, the God of Israel.

Here's the problem for us. See, false faith is not just a mental game that we play with ourselves. This is how you get false faith. We invent our own faith.

You take a little bit of this and a little bit of that. You believe what you want to believe. And what false faith does is it gives us a little bit of comfort in the short term and it takes away some of the intellectual embarrassment.

[ 14 : 03 ] But if you go home this afternoon and read through Isaiah 7, you'll see it as the path of death. And the reason that you and I gather here week by week is to hear the word of God.

And the reason we need to hear the word of God is not to be interested and intellectually stimulated, but because our hearts constantly manufacture idols that are easier for us to believe than the true God and we need to hear the true God revealing to us who he is again and again and again and again.

Then Ahaz stood at the end of a long line of kings who wanted to make a God more like they were and everything now rests on how he is going to choose.

Do you know history and the scripture tell us that Ahaz is the last king of Israel. There were more kings but there were puppet kings serving under various foreign powers.

The decision that Ahaz takes in chapter 7 sets the trajectory, the direction for God's people all the way till Christ comes.

[ 15 : 08 ] And I think we need to pause and ask ourselves a question. In our generation God's purposes continue to advance and the question for us is will we trust the promises of God and the word of God or not?

When future generations look back on our generation of Christians in Canada what will the trajectory be? What will the direction be that we have set for them?

Will we be looked at those who risked our lives on the promise of God? Or those who squandered our lives for our own security and for this world's worth?

Is the direction that we're setting now, I don't mean tomorrow, I mean now, is the direction we're setting marked by an open acknowledgement of our sin before God?

A desire to submit to the holiness of God and a passion to extend his name to others or by an embarrassment with the name of Christ? A lack of clarity in our faith and in our understanding of God's word and a passion for our own comfort and position.

[ 16 : 18 ] These are hard questions. Will we pass on to our children the faith of the God of the Bible, a faith that we have contended for despite the cost and an example of lives lived unashamedly in the service of God?

Or will we pass on a faith that's been recalibrated to the values of the culture and an example of life marked by lethargy and confusion and fear? It will be so much harder for our next generation to be courageous and faithful if we, in this generation, drift.

drift. And that is what Ahaz chooses to do. He rejects the offer of God's word and do you know what happens? God does not withdraw the sign but the nature of the sign changes and we now get to Isaiah 7, 13 and 14.

So let's look at that together. 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. A holy young woman shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us.

[ 17 : 33 ] God says to Ahaz, Yes, you may reject my sign but I am still going to give it. And now it will no longer be an invitation to faith, it will rather be a demonstration of my anger.

You see, how does God address the disobedience and disbelief of his world? He does it by giving this sign, A virgin shall conceive, the word should read, and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel, which means God with us.

The child will be God, the holy, holy, holy Lord of heaven and earth with us. And that is why there is a deep ambiguity in the sign itself.

The fact that God is with us does not mean one thing, it means two different things. You see, his work will be as deep as death and as high as heaven.

His work will be to bring many down to death and it will be to bring many up to heaven. So from chapter 7 verse 14 right through to the end of chapter 8, every verse is marked by judgment.

[ 18 : 45 ] Look at verse 18, it begins in that day and verse 20 in that day and verse 21 in that day verse 23 the same. Because the presence of the Holy One of Israel brings both judgment and salvation.

I want to show you how this works. If you would keep your finger in Isaiah 7 and turn back to Psalm 114 for a moment. Psalm 114 tells us that the Exodus is not one nation overturning slavery.

It's not a story of great faith. It's not a story of great risk and heroism. It's the record of God coming to his planet Earth, the Creator. Let's read, shall we, the whole psalm together.

114 When Israel went forth from Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange land, Judah became his sanctuary, Israel his dominion.

The sea looked and fled, Jordan turned back, the mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs. What ails you, O sea, that you flee, O Jordan, that you turn back, O mountains, that you skip like rams, O hills like lambs.

[ 20 : 04 ] Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob, who turns the rock into a pool of water, and a flint into a spring of water.

Here is God, the Lord, Yahweh, the Creator of the ends of the earth, and as he comes into his creation, all the world quivers in fear. The whole earth trembles in the presence of God and of his righteous judgment.

Here is the one whose glory fills all the heavens, the one who is three times holy. Here is the issue. If the earth itself trembles in the presence of this God, what will save us when Emmanuel comes to be God with us?

And I think that's the question we're meant to ask from Isaiah 7. And that is the first side of Emmanuel, but there is another side.

So let's quickly go back to Isaiah 9 this time. Isaiah 9 verse 6 tells us that this boy, this child, will be born.

[ 21 : 18 ] This son will be given and the government will be upon his shoulder. And this is his name, wonderful counsellor, mighty God, everlasting father, prince of peace, the increase of his government and of peace, there will be no end.

Upon the throne of David and over his kingdom to establish it and uphold it with justice, with righteousness, from this time forth, forevermore, the zeal of the Lord of the hosts will do this. who is this child?

He is God with us. He will be the mighty God. But he does not just bring the terror, but he also brings peace. In fact, he brings righteousness and he brings justice and he brings shalom, which our world is so desperate for.

And how will he do that? And the answer is that there is one more reference to Emmanuel and it is in Isaiah chapter 8. It comes directly between 7 and 9.

Let's do chapter 8 verse 8. And it will sweep on into Judah. This is the flood of God's judgment.

[ 22 : 32 ] It will overflow and pass on, reaching even to the neck. And its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Emmanuel. In the middle of God's judgment we read Emmanuel himself is caught up in the judgment.

Somehow this Emmanuel suffers the consequences of God's judgment. And I find this remarkable, that the bridge between Emmanuel being a sign of condemnation in chapter 7 and Emmanuel being the prince of righteousness and salvation in chapter 9 is here in chapter 8 verse 8 where the reality is that Emmanuel is submerged under the judgment of God himself.

Isn't that wonderful? And so now we turn to Matthew chapter 1. I told you we'd get there. So we've thought about the beauty of God and we've thought about the sign of God and now the coming of God.

A wonderful thing the New Testament opens on this exact note that we've been speaking about. We read about a virgin who conceives by the power of the Spirit. Verse 22 all of this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet.

Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and his name shall be called Emmanuel which means God with us. Jesus is the sign of God promised in Isaiah 7.

[ 24 : 11 ] The birth of this baby is what God promised 700 years before. He is the wonderful counselor. He is the mighty God.

He is the prince of peace. And all that is involved in Emmanuel is fulfilled in him. He brings both judgment and salvation. His coming is as deep as death and as high as heaven.

And nothing has happened since all creation that has more power to both bring us comfort and to threaten us than this child. And that is why verse 21 is so astonishing.

It is the announcement by the angel that the primary role of this Emmanuel will not be condemnation but will be salvation. Verse 21 the angel says Joseph she will bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins.

The Emmanuel has come and he comes with a salvation but it is a very specific kind of salvation. It's not an economic, it's not a political salvation. It is a salvation from sins.

[ 25 : 24 ] A salvation from all that is unholy. A salvation from false faith and from disobedience. A salvation that lifts us up from the depths of death to the heights of heaven.

Yes it will involve judgment. It will involve judgment as Emmanuel himself bears the judgment for our sins. And that's why he comes bringing healing and forgiveness in his wings.

It is because through the suffering of judgment he pays the price for us. And that is the deepest core of the best news of Advent. That is why we prepare for Christ's coming again by turning to Christ, by placing our trust in him.

And we do that by turning away from our sins. It's sin alone that keeps us from the presence of God.

It's sin alone that blinds us to the beauty of God's holiness and gives us a taste for other things. But turning to Christ means turning from sin and from all that is unholy.

[ 26 : 31 ] Because at the cross of Jesus Christ, Jesus was taken as deep as death so that we might rise as high as heaven. He offers us forgiveness and he offers us the presence of God and he says to everyone who turns to him in faith.

Behold, I will be with you. I will be God with you even to the end of this age. Amen. This digital audio file, along with many others, is available from the St. John's Shaughnessy website at [www.stjohnschaughnessy.org](http://www.stjohnschaughnessy.org).

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We hope that this message has helped you and that you will share it with others. Thank you.