

"Advent" Isaiah 7:1-14

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[0 : 00] Good morning, church. Would you turn with me to our sermon passage, Isaiah chapter 7.

That's page 535 in the Pew Bible. As Pastor Matt mentioned, leading up to Christmas, the church historically celebrates a season called Advent.

Advent's a word that simply means arrival or coming. This is the time of year when we remember Jesus' first advent, his first coming in the incarnation, and we look ahead to his second advent, his second coming in glory.

And this year, to do that, we're going to be looking at four passages in the book of Isaiah. And each of these passages talks about the coming of the Messiah, the coming of Christ, and the light that he has brought into our darkness.

Now, one of the things that many folks do in this early part of the season is decorate for Christmas. Thanks to Kirsten and everyone else who helped to decorate the sanctuary yesterday.

[1 : 15] It looks great. But how about you? Is this the weekend that you pull out the garland and the ornaments and the wreaths? Do you put up your Christmas tree this weekend? There's something comforting and enriching, I think, about bringing out the same decorations year after year, perhaps the nativity scene, which if you made it to Sunday school this morning, you learned that St. Francis, like, invented the nativity scene.

So, check that out on the podcast. He didn't invent it, but, you know, he kind of, well, whatever. You can listen to it and figure it out for yourself. So, maybe you bring out your nativity set. Maybe you bring out your ornaments. Maybe you hang the stockings.

You know, these kind of traditions can give a sense of continuity and stability to what can often be a hectic and stressful time of year, can't it? But the danger, of course, is that over time, these things lose their meaning.

It can just become stuff that we trudge out this time of year to try to get in the mood. But in reality, it doesn't carry much weight, right?

It's just decoration. Now, I wonder if some Scripture passages become the same thing for us, especially during Advent.

[2 : 36] We've heard them before lots of times, and they become just decoration. With little traction in our everyday lives, with little relevance for our deeper fears or longings.

Behold, the Virgin will conceive and bear a son, and you shall call his name Emmanuel. Is that familiar Advent verse just decoration for us?

Or is it a light piercing the darkness? Well, I hope we'll find that it's the latter.

Because when we look at Isaiah chapter 7, where that prophecy is first given, we find that it doesn't come in the midst of holiday celebrations and cookie baking and stockings over the fire.

It comes in the midst of fear and turmoil. It comes to a tragic young king who's about to lose his kingdom before his reign has even begun.

[3 : 43] It comes in the middle of messy geopolitics, war-hungry empires, and petty kingdoms vying for survival. It comes to a people so afraid that they're like branches of a tree shaken in the wind.

And it comes to us in our fears. When our world seems about to crumble, when we're grasping for security, for stability, when we're trying to find something reliable to save us, right there in our fears, that's where it comes.

Whether they be political fears or family fears, job fears or relationship fears, childhood fears or old age fears, that's where the promise comes.

So let's pick up this passage in Isaiah chapter 7, verses 1 through 14. And let's see what God has to say to us. Isaiah 7, 1 through 14, we'll have it on the screens.

If you want to follow along, it's page 535 in the Pew Bible. It goes like this, In the days of Ahaz, the son of Jotham, son of Uzziah, king of Judah, Rezan, the king of Syria, and Pekah, the son of Ramaliah, the king of Israel, came up to Jerusalem to wage war against it, but could not yet mount an attack against it.

[5 : 14] When the house of David was told, Syria is in league with Ephraim, the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.

And the Lord said to Isaiah, go out to meet Ahaz, you, and Sheer, 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 at the fierce anger of Rezan and Syria and the son of Ramaliah. Because Syria with Ephraim and the son of Ramaliah has devised Ezel 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 Tabil as king in the midst of it.

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 Rezan 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 Ramaliah. If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.

[6 : 35] Again, the Lord spoke to Ahaz, ask a sign of the Lord your God. Let it be as deep as Sheol or as high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask.

I will not put the Lord to the test. And 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. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Emmanuel.

All right, let's pray. Father, we have read your word. Help us now to understand what it is your spirit is saying to us through it. And let us see how this text brings us to your incarnate word, our Lord Jesus Christ, who is our only hope and security.

In his name we pray. Amen. So, in verses 1-2 of Isaiah 7, we see the people's fear. And then, in verses 3-14, we see two ways that God invites us to respond to our fears.

[7 : 45] Let's briefly look at the fear in verses 1-2. We're told there that the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.

Now, the date here is most likely 735 B.C. And Ahaz has just recently come to the throne of the southern kingdom called Judah.

Ahaz's father, Jothan, and his grandfather, Uzziah, were both good kings for the most part. But now, just as Ahaz takes the throne, things start falling apart.

We know from the history books of 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles and chapter 16 of 2 Kings and chapter 28 of 2 Chronicles that Ahaz's kingdom is getting pressured on every side.

Most immediately, there are two kings, one from the northern kingdom of Israel and one from their northern neighbor, Syria. These two kings have shown up on Ahaz's doorstep to bully him into joining their alliance against the vast empire of Assyria.

[8 : 52] Assyria, at this time, was the dominant superpower and they were brutal. So these two local kings, Rezan and Pekah, they're ready to dethrone Ahaz, put a puppet ruler in his place so that they can forge a coalition against this looming threat.

Now put yourself in Ahaz's shoes. Your reign is just getting started. You're probably in your early 20s, something like that Ahaz was. And you hear word that looming in the distance is a hungry empire ready to devour.

And now your closest neighbors are bringing their armies against you as well. This is a crisis of huge proportions. And it doesn't seem like there's really a way out, right?

Do you fight against your two northern neighbors? If you lose, they dethrone you. But what happens if you win? Most likely, you'll be so depleted militarily that you'll simply then fall to the Assyrians when they inevitably come.

On the other hand, do you join their petty alliance? Again, what hope is there in that? Can their small little kingdoms really stand against the war machine that's about to come crashing down upon them all?

[10:18] And so the heart of Ahaz and the heart of all the people shake like trees in a storm. You know, there are two ways that you can approach the Christmas season, this season we call Advent.

On the one hand, you can stuff yourself full of sentimentality and distraction. And there's plenty to be had this time of year. You can try to use nostalgia and Christmas cookies and Hallmark movies and ugly sweaters and peppermint mochas to mask or dull or ignore what's really going on inside of you.

You can just try to cover it all over. But that doesn't stop the shaking, does it? Still, our hearts shake like trees in the wind.

On the other hand, you can do what Christians for hundreds and hundreds of years have done. They have used the season of Advent as a time not to ignore or distract or dull themselves, but to get real with themselves and with God.

To admit that we do have very real fears and insecurities. To admit that we aren't the sort of people that we long to be as we look back over the year that's gone by.

[11:48] To acknowledge that our hearts are shaking and maybe we don't even know why. And to ask, to ask God to come and to show us.

You know, traditionally, Advent was a penitential season of the church. At its best, that meant that Advent was a time not merely to distract ourselves, but to do some serious self-examination in the Lord's presence.

To ask Him to come and to do a deep work in our fearful and sinful hearts. Of course, that doesn't mean you can't enjoy the Christmas season.

You should enjoy this season. Watch a Hallmark movie or two or three if that's your sort of thing. I mean, they all have the exact same plot, right? So, you know, if you like one, you sort of like them all. By all means, eat a Christmas cookie.

But friend, don't miss, don't miss out on the deepest joy that there is to be found in Advent. And that joy doesn't come from ignoring our fears, but from admitting them in God's presence and then seeing how He will meet you in the midst of them.

[13:08] So, how does God invite us to respond here in Isaiah 7? Well, in times of great fear, God invites us to trust His sovereign word.

In times of great fear, trust God's sovereign word. We see this in verses 3 through 9. Through Isaiah, God sends His word to Ahaz. Ahaz is out inspecting the water supply into the city.

Why is he doing that? Well, he's preparing for invasion, you see. He's trying to figure out how he's going to get himself out of the crisis. And while Ahaz is in the middle of trying to come up with a plan to rescue himself, God's word comes.

And it's a word of promise. Are you afraid, Ahaz, of these two kings knocking at your door, Rezin and Pekah? They look scary.

They talk big. But let me tell you what I see. Two smoldering stumps. You think they're going to set your kingdom ablaze, but I'm telling you, Ahaz, they're already burned out.

[14:18] Don't be afraid of them. What they're threatening won't come to pass. Within your lifetime, God says, these two kingdoms won't even be recognizable anymore. And then God says this to Ahaz, if you're not firm in faith, you won't be firm at all.

Where does real stability in the midst of crisis come from? What will calm our shaking hearts when the storms of fear blow? Does it come from having a great plan for how to respond?

That can help. Does it come from knowing the right people? Sometimes. Does it come from having wealth or resources? Maybe, to some degree. But none of those things will really make you firm.

They're all shaky at best. None of them will last. No, real stability comes when we hear the word of the sovereign God and trust Him.

Why? Because God is God. Infinitely wise and righteous and good. God knows the end from the beginning.

[15:39] He put the most massive stars in place and fashioned the most intricate detail of the tiniest Adam and this powerful and good God says, hear my voice and trust me.

That's where your stability must lie because then your life rests on a foundation that's not subject to the fallen whims of the world.

But your life rests on the infinitely sure purposes of the sovereign God. God. in crisis God's word came to Ahaz offering him the divine perspective that he so desperately needed in that moment.

A young king afraid of losing his throne, afraid of losing his life and God says they won't harm you Ahaz. Trust me. Be careful.

Be quiet. Do not fear and don't let your heart be faint. What promise do you need to hear from God's word today?

[16:51] You might be thinking, well, look, if a prophet showed up and told me exactly what God wanted to hear, that would make it a little easier, right? But friend, consider that we have something even better than that.

God has actually preserved his spoken words in his written word and the Holy Spirit speaks through the written word every time it is read in prayerful trust.

Do you see then how much better of a position we are in than Ahaz? We don't have to wait for an Isaiah to show up. You can open God's written word and immerse yourself in God's sovereign promises at any time and in any place.

How good God has been to us. The Apostle Peter says in his second letter, God has granted to us his precious and very great promises so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature.

You can become more and more like Christ as you hear his word. What promises do you need to hear today? Perhaps you've begun to fear that God has forgotten you, that your life is simply wending on in meaninglessness.

[18:17] But listen when God's word says, I know the plans I have for you, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and hope.

Perhaps you're in the midst of great trial or suffering and you wonder if any good is going to come out of it. But listen when God's word says, for those who love God, all things work together for their good.

For those whom God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son, in order that he might be the first born among many brothers and sisters, and those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he justified, and those whom he justified he glorified.

All things are working for your good, sister, for your glory. Perhaps you're wrestling with an area of obedience, and to walk in the way of Christ just seems too costly.

You think of the sacrifice you might need to make to follow Jesus, and it's overwhelming for you. But listen when God's word says, when Jesus says, truly I say to you, there's no one who has left house, or brothers, or sisters, or mother, or father, or children, or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brothers, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, and in the age to come, eternal life.

[19:49] What you may lose now is nothing compared to what you will gain when you take up your cross and follow Jesus. perhaps you're struggling under the weight of guilt.

Maybe through the Holy Spirit's conviction you've begun to see your sin, how great it is, how little you fought against it, how offensive it is to the God who made you and who loves you, and you wrestle with the fear that perhaps God hasn't forgiven you, perhaps he's withheld his mercy from you.

But listen when God's word says, come now, let us reason together, says the Lord, though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.

Though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. Friends, Jesus' death on the cross is sufficient to pay for a hundred lifetimes of your sins, and infinitely more.

There is no sin that his death has not washed away for all who simply trust in him. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow.

[21:07] With every promise of God's sovereign word, we place another rock into a foundation that no storm can topple. Our hearts may shake like trees in the storm, but hearing God's word and trusting God's word will push our roots deeper into the soil of his stability so that no wind will cause us to fall.

So brothers and sisters, in times of great fear, trust God's sovereign word. But God doesn't stop there. He's warned Ahaz, if you're not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.

And knowing that our faith is so often not firm, God pursues Ahaz even further. And this is what we see in verses 10 through 14.

In this paragraph, we see the second way God invites us to respond to our fears. In times of great fear, we must receive God's gracious sign.

In times of great fear, receive God's gracious sign. In verses 10 and 11, God pursues Ahaz. He says, ask a sign of the Lord your God. Let it be as deep as Sheol or as high as heaven.

[22 : 24] What a gracious thing for God to do. You know, God could have said, look, Ahaz, I told you what's true, now it's up to you. Believe it or don't. But God actually goes a step further. He says, let me give you a sign, Ahaz.

I won't just give you my promise, though that should be good enough. I'll give you a sign, I'll do something in history and material creation to help you believe the promise. I'll give you something that's a marker, that everything I've said will come true and that you'll know that it was me.

What condescension on God's part to do such a thing? But what happens next is tragic. In verse 12, Ahaz rejects God's gracious offer.

Now, at first, it sounds like Ahaz is being really spiritual, right? I won't put the Lord to the test. It sounds holy, right? It sounds deferential. But we know from the rest of Isaiah and we know from the history given in 2 Kings and in 2 Chronicles that Ahaz is not being sincere here.

He's already made up his mind how he will respond to the crisis. He's already got a plan of action that doesn't involve God. So he gives this kind of pious sounding answer, but in reality he's telling God, no thanks, I'm going to do it my way.

[23 : 50] Friends, beware of using piety to avoid God and to simply go your own way. And what was Ahaz's way?

How does this young king see his way out of the crisis? How will he keep his head on his shoulders and his kingdom under his feet when everything is going wrong? Well, from a human point of view, he does something incredibly clever.

Rather than fighting these two local kings in order to keep his independence, and rather than joining them in kind of a petty alliance, he actually outmaneuvers them. He makes a pact with none other than the empire of Assyria.

he goes to the looming war machine itself, and he cuts a deal. And in the short term, it works.

But in the long term, it's a disaster. And isn't that the way it always goes? The very things we trust to save us apart from God, in the end, devour us.

[25 : 01] Ask anyone familiar with addiction, and they'll tell you. At first, alcohol, or drugs, or sex, it begins as a way to kind of cover up the hurt, and the pain, or the shame, or the guilt, and it sort of works at first.

But then you become enslaved. You need more and more, and you can't stop, and it controls everything. And the hurt, and the pain, and the shame, and the guilt, they don't go away.

They just get worse and worse. Now, with alcohol, or drugs, or sex, it's kind of easy to spot, right? But what about our more respectable substitute self-rescue attempts?

We throw ourselves into work. We throw ourselves into good works. We throw ourselves into family. We throw ourselves into religion. as an attempt to save ourselves, to find our way through the crisis, and it backfires.

[26 : 12] These self-rescue projects ask more and more of us. We need to work more hours. We need to have a more perfect family. We need to be more performative and more devout in our religious practices.

They ask more and more of us, and they give less and less. And our fears remain. they backfired on us just as they backfired on Ahaz.

If you go on and read the rest of Isaiah 7 and 9, you'll see how they describe that God's saying that the Assyrian Empire would come and it would topple not just northern Israel, not just Damascus and Syria, but it would keep coming.

And like a swarm of bees, like a razor cutting down everything in its path, death, the empire would come right to Jerusalem's doorstep and leave the kingdom in ruins.

Ahaz made a deal with the devil, and in time the devil would come for his due. But even though Ahaz had rejected God's gracious offer, in his mercy, God still gives the sign.

[27 : 24] verse 13, and he said, here then, O house of David, is it too little for you to weary men that you weary my God also? There's another sign that Ahaz wasn't being sincere.

And then God says this, therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Emmanuel. And the passage goes on to say, if you

keep reading it, that in a few short years, by the time that newborn child has grown up enough to tell right from wrong, these two kings that Ahaz is so afraid of will be defeated.

But because Ahaz has rejected God and entrusted himself to Assyria, this child will also serve as a sign of judgment. By the time the child can tell right from wrong, the empire of Assyria will have toppled the cities of Judah and turned the once cultivated farmlands into wastes and wilderness.

And the only thing that will be left to eat are the things that they'll have to hunt or gather, like honey or curds and milk from their couple of goats that are left over. And there you have it, Isaiah 7.

Merry Christmas. But is that all that God's sign in Isaiah 7 was meant to convey?

[28 : 49] Was it just a sign of hope and judgment for Ahaz's day? You know, as we read on in this section of Isaiah, this whole section, which is chapter 7 through 12, we see that there's more here than initially meets the eye.

It becomes clear that the prophecy of chapter 7 verse 14 has both a provisional fulfillment, but it reaches out into an ultimate fulfillment.

In chapter 8, we see this provisional fulfillment. Isaiah's own wife gives birth to a son. They give him a symbolic name. And we're told that by the time this child can say, my father or my mother, the threat of Damascus and Samaria will be no more.

But does that exhaust the sign of verse 14? No. Because the rest of Isaiah 7 through 12 will point to us, as we follow the same argument along, it will point us to an even greater child to be born.

In chapter 9, we're told that a child will be born who will have an everlasting reign. And then in chapter 11, this coming king is shown to be full of the Holy Spirit, so full of God's presence that he'll be perfect in justice and perfect in wisdom.

[30 : 08] And through his reign, God's people and God's creation even will be restored and healed forever. So this provisional fulfillment in Isaiah's day couldn't exhaust the full promise that God had given starting in Isaiah 7.

No, a day would come when a virgin would conceive and bear a son. And he would be Emmanuel, God with us.

Not merely a sign, but a reality. And he would be full of justice and wisdom. And his kingdom would never end.

And this promise of Isaiah 7, 9, and 11 would remain with God's people for generations.

It would outlast the Assyrian empire. It would outlast even the kingdom of Judah. It would persist through the Babylonian exile. And then when Babylon falls, it would keep going throughout the rule of the Persians and right into the middle of the Roman occupation who displaced the Persians.

[31 : 16] And when God's people were still under the rule of their enemies, an oppression that began all the way back in the days of Ahaz and his fateful decision at the upper pool on the highway to the washer's field, the downward slide that began on that day, that promise would persist all the way down hundreds of years into the midst of Roman oppression.

And in the sixth month, after generations of waiting, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David.

And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you. But she was greatly troubled at this saying and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.

And the angel said to her, Don't be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

[32 : 47] And Mary said to the angel, How will this be since I am a virgin? And the angel answered her, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

Therefore, the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who is called barren, for nothing will be impossible with God.

And Mary said, Behold, I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word. And the angel departed from her.

Contrast for a moment, Ahaz with Mary. Ahaz was in an impossible situation from a human perspective, wasn't he?

His young reign was almost over before it began, and rather than trust God's word, he trusted what his own efforts could accomplish, this military alliance with Assyria.

[33 : 52] But Mary, receiving an equally impossible promise from a human perspective, says, Behold, I am the servant of the Lord.

Let it be to me according to your word. For nothing will be impossible with God. God. And when Jesus Christ was born, the sign of Isaiah 7 became a reality.

God entered space and time and history. God took on our human nature in its entirety, and he fulfilled every promise that had been made for thousands of years, including the promise of Isaiah 7, that a virgin will conceive and bear a son, and you'll call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us.

But why a virgin birth? Why did God choose to enter history in this way? Because the rescue that God would accomplish through Jesus, the Messiah, would be his own work from beginning to end. God would become fully human through Mary, but not as a result of human work or effort or accomplishment or deeds. Mary's part was to hear the promise and believe, and that's true of all of us.

[35 : 26] That's what God wanted Ahaz to see. That Ahaz didn't need to scheme and fret and make his own salvation. That Ahaz could trust that God would accomplish what his own works could not.

And that's why it had to be a virgin birth, because God wanted our faith to rest on him and on him alone. It's his work from beginning to end. And if it's his work from beginning to end, then in times of great fear, our faith has found the greatest place to rest.

Our faith has found a resting place, not in device or creed. We trust the ever-living one whose wounds shall plead for me.

The one who took human nature apart from any human work also died and rose again apart from any of your works, so that now you and I can be rescued utterly apart from our works.

And that means we need no longer fear. When our hearts shake like trees in a storm, we know that Emmanuel has come.

[36 : 46] God is with us. Jesus Christ has secured eternal salvation and eternal life for all who simply trust in him. Every promise is yes and amen in him.

So we can let go of our false comforts and our self-rescue projects and cling to him completely. And in him, in Emmanuel, find security and comfort no matter what the storms may be.

Let's pray together. Lord Jesus, we simply pause and give you praise as the one who is the fulfillment of all God's promises.

And Lord, we thank you that you are an anchor in the fiercest storms. Father, seeing how you fulfilled your promises in Jesus, we can be sure that you will likewise make good on all of your word to us.