

'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son...'

Isaiah 7:10-16

(4th Advent)

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Introduction

“The Virgin will conceive and give birth to a son...” That is the best Christmas verse from the Old Testament. But why did God 725 years before Jesus was born, announce this wonderful promise?

God wanted to teach people in the time of Isaiah a lesson to trust in Him and not in anything or anyone else.

When we face problems, most of us have a tendency to take matters in our hands and do all we can to solve that problem. We worry, we think, we act. Often the idea to ask God for help only comes as an afterthought.

The story of prophet Isaiah and King Ahaz of Judah shows us how dangerous it is to not give our God the first place when we face problems. When we fear, let us pray to Him. When we worry, let us cast our cares on Him.

In the grip of fear

King Ahaz was in the grip of fear. There was panic in the land; the people were scared to death. What was happening?

Judah had enemies - and they had formed a coalition: Pekah, king of Israel, had invited king Rezin of Aram to combine forces and to conquer Judah and its capital, Jerusalem. The people of God were threatened. Their life in their own land was not safe anymore.

Elsewhere in the Bible we read how bad the situation for Judah was. Thousands of people of Judah had been killed, and many had been taken as prisoners. The end for the people of Judah seemed near.

Imagine, Israel - yes Israel! - was attacking Judah. It was bad enough that the people of God were divided into two states, Israel and Judah. It was even worse that they were fighting one another. And Israel was even using the pagan nation of Aram to destroy Judah.

This is like one church fighting the other with the help of outsiders. This is never acceptable. It dishonours God when his people are divided, and even more so when they attack each other.

While Aram and Israel were badly beating up Judah, the Edomites and the Philistines also used this golden opportunity to also take chunks of Judah's land.

No wonder King Ahaz and the remnant of the people in Jerusalem were scared; they felt choked. When would the end for the nation come? Would Jerusalem soon fall?

Would Aram and Israel come to kill king Ahaz and his sons, to finish off the royal family of David? Was all hope lost? Was this the end for the people of God?

Was this the end of all the promises of God for salvation, for peace in the land under the offspring of King David? Was this the end of the hope for the great Messiah, who would come from that family of David and who would be ruling as King over the people of God in a Kingdom of peace and prosperity?

Ahaz was religious but in religion he was pragmatic. He had decided that the gods of the Canaanites - the gods of the land - would probably help him better than the God of his forefathers. So for saving the nation and his own skin, he worshipped all the gods of the land; he even killed his own son as a sacrifice to Moloch.

In the hour of need, Judah and Jerusalem did not turn to the God of their forefathers, to the God of the Bible. They had made God their enemy in their good days, and they did not know how to make him their friend in their hour of need. They did not even look for him.

God's promise to save

But God still desired to care for his people! he is so gracious. So He sent his prophet, Isaiah, to king Ahaz. You can read this in the part of Isaiah just before what we have read.

Isaiah had a wonderfully comforting message. God still offered hope and victory, even though Ahaz was such an evil leader. For the sake of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and because of his Messianic promises, God did not want to give up on his people. Just as God does not give up on you and me. He knows your situation and he wants to be your helper in need.

What does Isaiah say? “Ahaz, be careful, keep calm and don’t be afraid. Do not lose heart!” There was every reason to panic, but God’s counsel is to not lose heart.

People who lose heart often also lose their brain! Emphatically Isaiah says that the plans of Aram and Israel will not happen. They will not be able to conquer the land and the city. They may be at the gates right now, but “It will not take place, it will not happen.”

But how is that possible, look at the dreadful might and power of Israel and Aram combined! Isaiah then shows Ahaz the true size of his enemies: ‘Your enemies, they look mighty, but look again. They are just vulnerable, mortal people. Who are they, compared with the might of the eternal God of heaven and earth?’

Do you have small or large problems that you deal with? Things you may have shared with others, or problems deep down in your heart and mind? Things you fear? Try to see them in the light of God. He knows how to handle them.

To King Ahaz, Isaiah promised: “It will not take place, it will not happen.” But Isaiah also had a precondition: “If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.”

The promise to King Ahaz was conditional: he would have to trust in God. And in order to help Ahaz to trust in God, the prophet invited him to ask God for a sign, something so significant that Ahaz would know that God can be trusted to save his people.

“Ask the Lord, your God – your God, Ahaz! – ask your God for a sign! You should know that your God – the God of the fathers, the God of the covenant - is able to intervene in your present problem!”

But Ahaz was not interested in a sign that proves that God can solve his problems. I think his mind was already made up. He was going to entrust his own and his nation’s fate to Assyria - a superpower in those days like the USA in our time.

How foolish of Ahaz. Instead of trusting God, he trusts in Assyria – a much larger nation, yes, but also potentially a much more dangerous enemy than Aram and Israel combined!

Ahaz preferred to play the nations against each other, not realising that this was like playing with fire!

He trusted the principle: the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Ahaz chose short term gain at the expense of long term troubles. When we make decisions in life we must never forget the long term implications. And the most important of those is, of course, how does my choice today impact my eternal life.

King Ahaz only thinks short-term and is not interested in God's gracious offer. So Isaiah is fuming. "Hear now, you House of David! Is it not enough that you try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also?"

'My God...' Interesting that Isaiah no longer talks about God as the God of Ahaz. Isaiah now speaks of God as my God – the God of Isaiah. As if God has nothing to do with Ahaz any more.

And this may be exactly what the prophet wants to say. His statement is full of threat: God is done with these kings in the House of David.

God gives his own sign of salvation

"You do not want a sign? I will give you a sign!" It is as if Isaiah spits it out.

The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel. Before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.

What sort of sign did God give to king Ahaz? Soon a young girl, still unmarried, still virgin, maybe his own fiancée, would get a baby, and before that child could even talk, Aram and Israel would both be destroyed. It is just a matter of a year or two.

Well, that is not so bad, is it? Precisely what Ahaz wanted - the destruction of Israel and Aram! But notice that the birth of a child and the destruction of Israel and Aram together, have become a sign of greater destruction...

Isaiah continues:

The LORD will bring on you and your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any... He will bring the king of Assyria.

Because Ahaz did not want to trust God but in Assyria instead, Assyria would become the downfall, the destruction of the people of Judah and of the House of David.

What Isaiah predicted has indeed happened when eventually the temple was destroyed and the people of Judah were taken to Assyria – to Babylon. The Davidic line of Kings was then forever finished. There was no more King from the house of David on the throne ever.

The rejection and disobedience by King Ahaz seem to be the definite turning point in the history of the Davidic royal bloodline. But this was not the end of all hope; the church later understood the prophecy about the virgin to get a child to have a much deeper meaning.

The Lord does not need those royal kings of David any longer. God himself will give a King to the people of God. He does not need those men of the House of David any longer – he will create leadership for his people – even from a virgin! Useless unbelieving men! The virgin will bear a child and he will be called Immanuel – God with us.

God's plans with the House of David have collapsed because of unbelief; the measuring cup of his anger is overflowing now. But in this judgment of God, there is still a promise of hope. God no longer needs this house of unbelief, but he does promise to give the true King to his people through a virgin, and this King, conceived in a completely impossible manner, will be truly the sign of God. The sign that God is with us. That God is in the land.

When our Lord Jesus Christ was born from the Virgin Mary, the early followers of Him saw this as the true fulfilment of these words of Isaiah. The Virgin Mary and Jesus are the sign. Our Lord Jesus signifies the presence of God – because He is the Son of God himself. The King of all Kings; the Lord of all Lords. God with us.

God wanted to save the land of Judah – so he offered salvation to King Ahaz – if he would only believe, if he would only trust in God.

And God offers salvation to us and to the world – salvation from sin, from eternal death, from hell, from our enemies, from the misery we are able to put ourselves in, the misery others put us in – if only we trust in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Call to faith

King Ahaz is a great example for us – for how not to respond to troubles in life. Do not think that you can solve all of your problems by your own hands, and mind. That may sink you deeper and deeper into problems.

Do not postpone trusting in God and to live for Him. The proper answer to our troubles in life is to look up at the sign God has given us; a Virgin became pregnant and brought the child into the world.

Any desire for God's presence in our life, his life-giving presence, his saving presence, begins and ends with looking at that Christmas-child. He is God with us. Let us embrace him in faith.

Amen