

December 18, 2022  
Isaiah 7:10-16

Advent 4  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## **“Our Persistent God”**

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, a young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.”

Dan Parker always prided himself on being a good neighbour, someone who could be relied on to come to the aid of those in his neighbourhood whenever they were in need. In the summer, he would help people with cutting their grass, looking after their homes when they were away, and sharing vegetables from his extensive garden. In the fall, he would be the first person to come over with a rake to help people gather leaves from their lawns. In the winter, Dan would fire up his snowblower and go down the block clearing snow off everyone’s driveway and sidewalk. Dan would always buy Girl Guides cookies from the neighbourhood children, contribute to any charity that was in need, and would volunteer many hours every Christmas at Salvation Army kettles. Dan firmly believed that “if you want to have a good neighbour, be a good neighbour.”

But in the past few years, Dan’s ability to live up to his standards of neighbourliness began to wane. His arthritis became more pronounced, making walking and doing the simplest of chores far more difficult. But Dan still insisted on keeping his house and doing his own chores, even when they caused him great pain. His neighbours, who had benefited from his generosity over the years, offered to help countless times, but he always politely turned them down. But one person who would not take “no” for an answer from Dan was Bobby, a very outspoken, precocious child who lived across the street from Dan. He would frequently spend time with Dan in the older man’s workshop and became a favourite of Dan and everyone in the neighbourhood. One day, Bobby noticed that Dan was struggling to rake his leaves, so Bobby grabbed a rake and crossed the street. When Dan saw him, he smiled and said, “Thanks Bobby, but I can take care of this.” But Bobby was not going to be deterred; he threw his rake down on the ground, put his hands on his hips, and told Dan in no uncertain terms what he was feeling: “Dan, you have got to let me help you! You have been so good to all of us for so many years; now it is our turn to be good to you. I am going to help you rake these leaves, and there is nothing you can do to stop me!” Dan knew that Bobby was right: he needed to let others be a good neighbour to him as he had been for them. The rest of that day, Dan and Bobby raked leaves together, and from that time on Dan realized that thanks to the persistence of that little child there were

others who would bless him, as he had blessed them.

As we come to this fourth and final Sunday of Advent, we once again hear the words of the prophet Isaiah reminding his readers of the steadfast love and persistent presence of God in the lives of God's people. The God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is a God who does not give up on the people even when the people give up on God. As Paul would write in his Second Letter to Timothy, "*if we are faithless, he remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself.*" (2 Timothy 2:13). This steadfast persistence is evidenced in today's lesson in which the Lord addresses King Ahaz and invites the king to "*ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.*" (Isaiah 7:11). This extraordinary offer comes at a time when Ahaz faces great threats to himself and to his nation. Two neighbours to the north of Judah – Israel, with its capital in Samaria, and Syria, with its capital in Damascus – are forming a coalition. Their kings are vassals of the mighty Assyrian empire, and they are pressing Ahaz to join them – but Ahaz refuses, and they respond with aggression. In 734 BC the armies of Israel and Syria invade Judah ("*Then King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah son of Remaliah of Israel came up to wage war on Jerusalem; they besieged Ahaz but could not conquer him.*" – 2 Kings 16:5). Their plan was to gain control of Judah's capital city, Jerusalem, and replace Ahaz with a new king who will do their bidding ("*Let us go up against Judah and cut off Jerusalem and make the son of Tabeel king in it*" – Isaiah 7:6). In this time of crisis, the Lord sends Isaiah to speak a word of comfort and reassurance to the king that Ahaz should "*take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands*" (7:4). The Word of the Lord calls the king to place his trust and faith in God to lead him through this crisis: "*It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass ... If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all.*" (7:7-9).

It is in this context of divine reassurance amid a national crisis that "*again the LORD spoke to Ahaz*" (7:10). Having announced God's sure protection of Judah against hostile assaults from the north, the prophet now moves to offer Ahaz some concrete signs of God's intentions. The offer of a sign "*is meant to confirm the divine promise ... the point of the sign is to underscore God's intention to do as he has promised.*" (Christopher Seitz). The fact that the Lord "again" spoke to Ahaz is evidence of the persistence of God, that the Lord does not give up on God's people; "*It is a measure of the graciousness of YHWH that the reluctant king is spoken to 'again.'*" (Gary W. Light). The new word from the Lord to Ahaz is an astounding invitation: "*Ask any sign of the LORD your God.*" Nothing was withheld from Ahaz; God was that intent on supporting the king.

- “Ask me for a sign, says God. Ask me anything. What can you imagine? What can you not imagine? I will show it to you. Dig deep into the earth, sink your mind as low as the pits of hell, and I will give you a sign there. I can work such salvation that the dead come to life again and the underworld itself gives birth.” – Anthea Portier-Young.

God has invited the king to ask for any sign that might assist him at this time of crisis; but Ahaz refuses, responding with an act that appears pious on the surface, stating that “*I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test*” (7:12). At first, it appears that Ahaz is being faithful to the teachings of Scripture that warn the people against putting the Lord to the test:

- “The people quarreled with Moses, and said, ‘Give us water to drink.’ Moses said to them, ‘Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?’” – Exodus 17:2.
- “Do not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah.” – Deuteronomy 6:16.

Ahaz appears to faithfully adhere to the teachings of the Torah, but “*the polished halo act does not fool YHWH, Isaiah, or the reader.*” (Light). The Lord’s offer of a sign to Ahaz must refer to a signal of reassurance. Given the context, the king’s response is to be seen as a failure of faith, and unwillingness to be reassured. It was common for kings and other leaders to inquire of the Lord, often through prophets, before going into battle (“*Now when Elisha had fallen sick with the illness of which he was to die, King Josiah of Israel went down to him ...*” – 2 Kings 13:14). It is possible that Ahaz does not want to ask for a sign because he is convinced that the Lord would grant it; if it were granted, Ahaz would have to change his plans, which had involved sending a petition to the king of Assyria declaring himself the king’s slave and asking the king to “save” him from the threat posed by Israel and Syria (“*Ahaz sent messengers to King Tiglath-pileser of Assyria, saying, ‘I am your servant and your son. Come up, and rescue me from the hand of the king of Aram and from the hand of the king of Israel, who are attacking me.’*” – 2 Kings 16:7). Asking God for a sign would mean abandoning his plans for protection from the king of Assyria, placing his trust instead in the Lord God of Israel; “*faith, remember, is not so much a belief as it is a trust, the willingness to lean on YHWH.*” (Light).

The Lord responds angrily through the prophet, who is the speaker for the remainder of the lesson. Isaiah has clearly lost all patience with Ahaz; the king has gone too far by using a hypothetical piety before God. Such an attitude excludes the king from a

personal relationship with God; Isaiah calls upon the king and his royal court to “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you should weary **my** God also?” (7:13). Isaiah refers to the Lord as “my God,” **not** “our God” or “your God.” Even though Ahaz seems to believe that “it is easier to sell himself to Assyria than wait for salvation from God” (Portier-Young), God nonetheless decides to give the king a sign that will be a sign of God’s power to save, “a security for every promise even when faith fails.” The promise will center on a birth: “Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.” (7:14). Here the good news is carried by the child’s name: *Immanuel*, “God is with us.” While Ahaz’s son Hezekiah would be referred to as “God was with him” (“The LORD was with him; wherever he went, he prospered.” – 2 Kings 18:7), the sign of Immanuel was greater than King Hezekiah. The sign was God’s promise that “deliverance will come, not through alliances or military might, but through divine intervention, by a God who keeps promises.” (Gene M. Tucker). The mother of *Immanuel* will be a “young woman” (*alma*), a term that is neutral about her marital status or sexual experience. It would be the Greek translation of Isaiah (the Septuagint) that introduced the rendering of “virgin” (*Parthenos*), thus setting the stage for the particular messianic interpretation of this passage in Matthew: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel” (Matthew 1:23). One of the keys to understanding this passage is the word “sign,” the same word used to refer to the “signs and wonders” performed in Egypt before the exodus. The decisive point in the Old Testament is that a “sign” is revelatory, that it communicates God’s word, will, or nature. Thus it is not remarkable that in Isaiah “something as common – and also as wonderful – as the birth of a baby boy is a message from God and a revelation of the future. The name embodies the promise of God’s saving presence.” (Tucker).

The prophet gives no specific timetable but speaks in terms of the birth and development of the child. When the baby eats “curds and honey” (7:15), it probably refers to the first solid food a baby eats after its mother’s milk; when the child can “refuse the evil and choose the good” it refers to some degree of moral accountability, but no biblical traditions indicate a particular age. The birth of a baby as a symbol of hope will again be proclaimed by the prophet when he announces that “a child has been born to us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (9:6). It is a message of assurance to Ahaz that the birth of this child is a sign that it will be by trusting in the Lord and not in any king or alliance that the king will be delivered from the threats to himself and to his nation; for “before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted” (7:16). For Ahaz, the birth of the child who is

*Immanuel* is a call to “live in an alternative world governed by this faithful God and by none other” (Walter Brueggemann). The message proclaimed by the prophet Isaiah “sees pregnancy and birth – even when not understood as miraculous – as signs of God’s concern for God’s people.” (Tucker).

The word of hope that summoned Ahaz to trust in the steadfast, persistent love and presence of God is the word that comes to Joseph when he learns that his fiancée Mary “was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:18). While Joseph could have exposed Mary to public disgrace due to this pregnancy that he assumes is the result of her affair with another man, he is visited by an angel of the Lord who appears to him in a dream and announces the truth regarding the child that Mary is carrying:

- “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” – 1:20-21.

While the annunciation to Joseph is similar to the announcement of the angel Gabriel to Mary that “you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus” (Luke 1:31), it also contains the first of several “fulfillment quotations” in Matthew, demonstrating the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. A fulfillment quotation “serves to underscore that almost everything about Jesus’ life was prepared by God and was foreshadowed in the Old Testament” (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri). The ten fulfillment quotations in Matthew show that everything God did in the Old Testament was preparation for Jesus Christ, including Mary’s conceiving Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy originally spoken at a time of crisis for the Davidic kingdom, a sign that the kingdom would not end under Ahaz but would continue under God’s protection. What was first a sign to Ahaz is now a sign to all people: in declaring “they shall name him Emmanuel” (1:23), the promise of the one who assures us of God’s presence among us is not a promise to only one person or one people; “what was made known by angelic revelation to Joseph, the just Jew, would be made known to all nations until the end of the world by apostolic preaching and teaching.” (Raymond Brown).

- “The passage about the virgin who gives birth to Emmanuel, like the great Suffering Servant song in Isaiah 53, is a word in waiting. There is nothing in its own historical context to correspond to it. So it remains an open question: it is addressed not merely to Ahaz. Nor is it addressed merely to Israel. It is addressed to humanity. The sign that God himself announces is given not for

a specific situation, but it concerns the whole history of humanity ... God did indeed give us a great sign for the whole world.” – Pope Benedict XVI.

As we celebrate the coming of Emmanuel in the birth of the child of Mary at Christmas, we are reminded of the steadfast love of our persistent God who does not give up on us even when we may give up on God. As God refused to take “no” as an answer from King Ahaz but provided him with a sign that pointed to a future filled with hope, God remains faithful to us even when we may turn away from God toward other sources of trust and confidence. God continues to provide for us, to care about us, to offer all the gifts and blessings of life *“out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all!”* (*Small Catechism*). Our God is a persistent God who insists on loving us, insists on providing for us, and insists on giving us the greatest gift of all that we behold in the manger in Bethlehem, the child born of Mary who is the fulfillment of all of God’s promises, the child who is the promise that God is with us and that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord. As Bobby would not accept “no” as an answer from Dan, God will never give up on us, but will continue to love us and bless us with the light that will shine in that little town of Bethlehem, where *“the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight,”* in the presence of our Saviour who promised his disciples that *“I am with you always, to the end of the age”* (Matthew 28:20). May we open our hearts this Christmas to this persistent love of God, the love that abides with us always in the presence of Emmanuel, God who is always with us.

Amen.