

The Promise
Isaiah 7:10-16 (Mt 1:18-25)
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A woman had named God as the recipient in her will. Word spread and the media picked up the story. People enjoyed the humor of the situation as the court searched for God. Finally, the will was dismissed because God could not be found in the city.

Our children, when they were around three or four, asked those questions parents love to deal with. Who is God? Where is God? Why can't we see God? Those kinds of questions. Your kids probably asked them too. When our kids have asked those questions, I have talked about how even though we can't see God, God is always with us.

Those kinds of questions aren't just for children, are they? The questions of where is God and how can we know God is with us still creep into our minds sometimes.

Our Scripture today and all the promises and stories of Christmas are about where God is and who God is. The key in this Isaiah passage is "Immanuel," which means "God with us."

Around 735 B.C., the king of Aram and the king of Israel (the northern Hebrew kingdom) were advancing on Jerusalem. They wanted to get rid of King Ahaz and replace him with someone who would join them in their coalition against Assyria. Ahaz and his advisers were shaken up by this attack and they were considering going to Assyria for help.

In the middle of this political situation, God gave Ahaz a message through the prophet Isaiah: "Be careful, keep calm and don't be afraid. Don't worry about these two smoldering stumps of firewood. They won't defeat you. In fact, they will be defeated and no longer be a threat to you. Stand in faith, trust in God, believe" (Isaiah 7:3-9). It's interesting that this message comes in a political and military situation. God comes into the real world where we live, in the situations that we have to deal with.

A little later (starting in verse 10), Ahaz and the rest of his court are apparently not convinced. Because Isaiah comes to Ahaz again with a

message from God: "Ask the LORD your God for a sign" from as deep or as high as you can imagine.

God offered him a sign, proof that God would do what he had said. God was willing to strengthen Ahaz's faith through a sign, an event that would soon happen and prove that the Lord had spoken through Isaiah.

Ahaz sounds pious as he responds, "I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test." He has been invited, even dared, to name something in heaven or earth or under the earth that would be proof of God's word to him. But he refuses, putting a religious veil over his fear and doubt and wavering. He doesn't really want to be convinced because then he will have to commit himself to the direction God is giving him.

Or possibly Ahaz is too timid even to ask God for something God wants to give him. My praying is sometimes timid and cautious. I sometimes hesitate to ask God for something. But God's grace offers more than we are often willing to ask. And when God has said, "Here! I want to give this to you—just ask!", it's not pious or noble not to ask.

Isaiah makes that clear to Ahaz and the royal court. He says, "Listen well, you royal family of David! You're trying my patience and you're even pushing God's to the limit. You won't ask for a sign? Then the LORD himself will give you a sign. Here it is: The virgin [or, young woman] will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." He is the sign that God is with us to deliver us. By the time he's old enough to know wrong from right, Israel and Aram will be laid to waste.

Whoever this young woman was, the king and rulers of Judah would have known her and her child. They would see their enemies destroyed before the child reached a certain age. He was a sign, he pointed to the fact that God was with them, protecting them.

So Isaiah's message, God's promise to Ahaz, was fulfilled. The people in Isaiah's day saw its fulfillment. But like so many promises in the Old Testament, there was more meaning in this one than the people realized at the time. God's promises are more than we could or would ask and they are fulfilled beyond our wildest dreams.

Now let's look at Matthew 1. As Matthew writes about the birth of Jesus, inspired by the Holy Spirit, he recalls this incident in Isaiah. He sees in

Jesus a deeper meaning in what Isaiah said. Jesus is, in fact, Immanuel—God with us. The child that Isaiah spoke of was a *sign* of God's presence with his people. Jesus is not just a sign of God presence, he *is* God's presence. Jesus is God coming to be with us, sharing our humanity. Part of my answer to our kids is that we can't see God, but people saw Jesus and he is God with us. Jesus is *the Promise* fulfilled.

I have often wondered what thoughts went through Mary and Joseph's minds as they held Jesus just moments after he was born. I imagine that a great deal of uncertainty must have invaded their thoughts. I also believe there was great expectation and joy as they beheld the promised one of God. What would He do? How would He bring about winning their freedom? What, if any, role would they play?

How do you hold a promise? Here was the Promise of all promises. God had promised this child to Abraham 42 generations before. Now here He was. The promise went back as far as people do. God promised this child to Adam and Eve after the fall. Now the promised one was here. How do you hold a promise? I hold a promise with a great deal of hope. Hope that it will prove to be true. Hope that it will be fulfilled. I also hold promises with a bit of anxiety. Will it come the way I think it will? Will it be all that I hope it would be? Once it has come to pass, will I be pleased with the result? I hold promises with hope and doubt, with joy and fear. I hold it firmly and yet a bit loosely.

Mary and Joseph held The Promise. We hold another promise today. Jesus, when He ascended into heaven, promised that He would return just as He left. For many, the promise may have been forgotten or at least put into some file in our brain that is seldom opened. Some live life as though there is no promise. After all, it has been [around] 2000 years since the promise was given. Maybe He forgot, maybe He changed His mind. If He has waited this long, He will probably wait a good while longer.

While Mary and Joseph were holding Jesus, many were sleeping in their beds oblivious to the fact that the Promise had come. Many of them missed the Promise altogether as He walked among them. It is important that we do not grow weary in holding onto the promise of His return. How do you hold a promise? Hold on. (David Mullins, *The Rag Tag*, Sep-Dec, 2001)

Jesus was God with us. Jesus continues to be God with us. Someday he will fulfill all that it means for God to be with us. What great promises! We couldn't have dreamed this up by ourselves. It's more than we would ask.

For a thousand years the dreamers dreamt
And hoped to see his love
But the Promise showed their wildest dreams
Had simply not been wild enough

(Michael Card, from *The Final Word*, also on *The Promise: A Celebration of Christ's Birth* and *The Life* boxed set)

Jesus was the name Joseph was told to give this baby Mary would have. Joseph showed that he was noble and righteous, faithful to God's law, by obeying God instead of doing what would have been easier on himself in this awkward situation.

Mary had said yes to God and she became the Messiah's mother. Now Joseph was saying yes to God and to the responsibility of caring for Mary and giving Jesus a family and a name.

The name "Jesus" means "Savior." It's the Greek form of the Hebrew "Joshua" which means "Yahweh/the Lord Saves." God is with us to save.

A Savior implies a need to be saved. And God comes as Savior because we need to be saved. "He will save his people from their sins." He will deliver people from their destructive resistance to God. He will heal and restore and forgive.

There's an old story that still makes the point. A man stayed home as his family went to church on Christmas Eve. He said, "I can't believe the

Christmas story." As he settled down to read the paper, he began hearing a thumping noise. He discovered that birds were trying to fly into the warm, lighted house and were hitting the picture window. He decided to help them. He went out, opened the barn and tried to direct the birds in there. But they were frightened of him. They flew away and kept trying to get into the house. He scattered bread crumbs, hoping to lure them to the barn. But they still wouldn't follow. He thought, "If only I could be a bird, I could tell them what I intend and lead them to safety." At that moment, the sound of bells and music from the church reached him and he heard "O Come, All Ye Faithful." And the man prayed, "God, now I realize—you had to do that for us."

God has come in Jesus Christ to show us himself, to show us his will, to save us, to lead us home, to show us what God intends us to be.

Like King Ahaz, we are challenged to receive what God wants to give and to stand in faith. Like Joseph, we are called to accept that Child, to receive him, to claim him as our own. When we do, we find that in Christ, God really is with us. What a promise! What a gift!

At a Christian counseling center in Dubuque, just before Christmas, the waiting room was full of tense and distraught people. Pain showed on their faces. Sadness was in their eyes. They were discouraged, depressed and defeated.

"Holidays are hard," one client told a stranger sitting next to him. In a nearby office, one therapist asked a colleague, "How can I help people celebrate Christmas when my own heart aches?" Then she got up and opened the door to the waiting room. Forcing a smile, she said "Come in," to her next client. Then the therapist and the client went to work on the holiday season stresses.

Moments later, a young woman, struggling with postpartum blues, entered the waiting room for her appointment. She was carrying her newborn baby who gurgled and cooed as he snuggled in his blanket. It was like a breath of fresh air.

When the pairs of therapists and clients began to come out from the offices, they saw the baby. Their eyes lit up. Smiles crossed their faces. They approached the young mother and her child with lighter steps and brighter

faces than when they had come in. They marveled at the tiny hands and feet and took turns holding the bundle of joy. The whole atmosphere of the waiting room changed from gloom to joy, from despair to hope, from tears to laughter. They were no longer just clients and therapists. They had become a community of love inspired by the simple presence of a child. (*Homiletics*, Nov-Dec 04, 54-55).

A few years ago, a woman in Tulsa was sitting in church praying when another woman approached her, asked her to watch her baby, then left and didn't return (*The Oklahoman* Dec 16, 2004 ,6A). What will you do with the baby offered to you at Christmas? As you sit here, God comes to you and offers himself to you in his Son Jesus.

The Promise is yours! Embrace that baby in the manger. Take him into your heart. The Reality is yours! He is more than you realize. He will come to be more to you than you can imagine.