

The Hopes and Fears of All the Years

Text: Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

...Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. Isaiah 7:14

...his name shall be called Immanuel (which means God with us). Matthew 1:23

The great Boston preacher of the 19th Century, Phillips Brooks, wrote the carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," in 1868 for the children of his parish to sing in their Sunday School Christmas program. It has become a favorite. It was as I was reflecting on the course of the Christian era over centuries past that the phrase from Brooks' carol came to mind -

The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

In that small Judean village a child was born and the carol's author sensed well the biblical witness regarding that birth; it was the pivot point of history.

Hopes and fears - a rather good description of the alternating moods of our lives, our corporate existence in the community of nations, our family life, our individual lives. Living in hope of some desired event or resolution; living in fear of some dread result.

The hopes and fears of all the years came to sharp focus in Bethlehem: The hope that life has purpose and meaning, that it is going somewhere, that our toil and tears, our suffering and sadness will not be to no avail, ending in emptiness or nothingness. Fearing that we may not hold on, that our best efforts and worst sins may end in a morass of meaninglessness.

Tracing the history of Western Civilization from the sixth and seventh centuries to the present has been an interesting and helpful study. One cannot help but sense the ebb and flow of historical tides; one cannot help but realize how short-sighted we are in our quick reaction to events of the immediate present. No doubt

that is exaggerated in our day because of the instant news coverage of everything that happens around the globe. There is such a bombardment of facts and opinions fastened on the immediate that one gets a skewed sense of things. There is little historical perspective and sober reflection on the larger patterns of history.

We get a sense of the super importance of the present and we are overly impressed with one moment on the canvas of history. We lose the sense of being linked in the larger chain of beings and we lose perspective on that which ultimately matters.

NBC may be the first to scoop the events breaking in Washington, but they were not there in Bethlehem. If they had been, you can bet their camera would have been at Herod's court or Jerusalem and Tom Brokaw would probably have remained in Rome at the Imperial residence. Yet in the dark stillness of Bethlehem streets the hopes and fears of all the years were focused.

It was not an easy world then. It was in quite as much turmoil then as now. That part of the world has been an open wound on the earth's surface for centuries. Rome was the occupying force. The period of history is part of the *Pax Romana*, the Roman peace; it was, however, a peace enforced by Roman legions, an enforced peace - certainly not the biblical shalom. Herod was the puppet ruler by the grace of Rome and he was jealous for his power and the perpetuation of his kingdom. Paranoia broke out with a vengeance following the visit of the Magi who spoke of the appearance of a star which foretold the birth of royalty.

Male children two years and under were massacred by Herod's order just in case it might be true that one had been born who would lay claim to Herod's throne. Can you imagine the brutality of that world? Can you imagine the fears with which a mother raised a child in that time?

Yet even in that brutal age with no press corps to keep a monarch honest, there were serious, reflective spirits who yearned for something better - hopes were present even in the world of pagan Rome. Hans Küng reports that

In the year 42 or 41 *before* Jesus' birth, at the beginning of the fifteenth year of grievous civil war following on the murder of Caesar, the Roman poet Virgil in his famous Fourth Eclogue announced the birth of a world savior. Was this an expression of hope in Caesar's great nephew and adopted son, Octavius and his house? In any case, when Octavius finally returned to Rome in the year 29, as sole ruler, after the victory over Antony and Cleopatra, his first official act was to close the temple of Janus, the double-faced god of war.

And "Augustus divi Filius" - "son of the divine one" (of Caesar elevated after his death to be a state god), translated in the Greek East as "Son of God" - did everything possible to realize the hopes nourished by Virgil of

the Utopia of an imminent reign of peace; *Pax Romana, Pax Augusta*, sealed with the consecration of the gigantic Ara Pacis Augustae, the Augustan altar of peace, in the year 9 B.C.. In the same year (according to the famous inscription found in 1890 in Priene in Asia Minor and later elsewhere) the "gospel" (evangelion, "good news") of the birthday of the "Saviour" and "God" who had now appeared - Caesar Augustus - was proclaimed in the East to the whole world: the savior who had brought to the broken world new life, happiness, peace, fulfillment of ancestral hopes, salvation. (*On Being a Christian*, p. 438)

Was not that ancient world as weary as our own of the interminable conflict, war, suffering and death that has been history's hallmark from the beginning?

In Isaiah's time it was little different than our own. The Old Testament lesson reports the international crisis, the intrigue, the maneuvering for position that occurred in the Eighth Century B.C.

The year was 734 B.C. On the world horizon, a great Empire was forming and its massive power was becoming a threat to all its neighboring peoples. That empire was Assyria, whose King was Tiglath-Pileser. The smaller neighboring peoples began to confer together. If they united, perhaps they could resist the Assyrian power.

There was Syria whose capital was Damascus and whose King was Rezin. There was Israel, the Northern Kingdom, whose capital was Samaria and whose King was Pekah.

They formed an alliance and urged their neighbor to the South, Judah, whose King was Ahaz, to join with them. But Ahaz was not ready to join. He, too, knew Assyria was growing in might and influence, but he feared that joining such an alliance would provoke the Assyrians and goad them into an attack. Thus, he rejected the offer of Israel and Syria who, in turn, felt they could ill afford to have their southern flank exposed and decided, consequently, that they would move forcibly against Judah and put a puppet king on the throne. They marched against Jerusalem and King Ahaz and his people tumbled. Jerusalem was besieged and Ahaz was terrified.

It seemed he had but two options — yield and join the alliance against Assyria, or appeal directly to Tiglath-Pileser, the Assyrian King, which would make him a vassal of Assyria.

A third option never occurred to him: to stand firm and trust God. That, however, was precisely the counsel of the prophet Isaiah. God's word through the prophet was:

Be on your guard, keep calm; do not be frightened or unmanned by these two smoldering stumps of firewood... (Isaiah 7:4)

Although they were determined to bring Jerusalem to its knees, the prophet's word was clear:

*This shall not happen now, and never shall...
Have firm faith, or you will not stand firm. (7:96).*

Ahaz was a practical man. Talk of standing firm and trusting God was foreign to him. He did not really want to hear Isaiah's word. And so God's word came a second time. This time Isaiah went a step further, offering a sign if the King desired.

Ask the Lord your God for a sign, from lowest school or from highest heaven. (7:11)

And the world lives under a cloud of fear, driven to the brink of hopelessness, yet always hoping, as well, that some conference or summit might yet produce peace on earth.

Isaiah's word to Ahaz was trust God for, beyond Damascus and Samaria and Assyria, beyond the kings and rulers of the earth, the Sovereign of history is working His purposes out. And as a sign that that is indeed the case, a child will be born and named Immanuel. That sign was not lost on Matthew reporting the birth narrative of Jesus.

In Matthew's narrative of the birth of Jesus, he cites this Isaiah passage, seeing the child Jesus as the ultimate expression of the truth that God is with us. After telling of Joseph's dream in which he was told of Mary's child, Matthew writes:

All this happened in order to fulfill what the Lord declared through the prophet: The virgin will conceive and bear a son, and he shall be called Emmanuel, a name which means 'God is with us.'

Isaiah's statement did not say anything about a virgin bearing a child. The Hebrew word for virgin was not used and the word used refers to a young woman of marriageable age. Matthew definitely uses the passage to support a virginal birth, but he adds that. It is not in Isaiah. It is not our purpose in this message to deal with the question of the Virgin Birth, but I only point out here that in the Old Testament context there is no reference to a virgin birth. The sign is a child of natural birth whose presence points to the presence of God; whose name says it: Immanuel, God with us.

And this is important for Matthew, too. If you stop to think about it, Jesus was named Jesus, not Immanuel. Jesus means Saviour. His name was *sign*-ificant. But Matthew is not concerned that he was not specifically named Immanuel, but only that he be understood as being a sign of God's presence.

If a child born in Judah in the days of King Ahaz *sign*-ified God with us, then Matthew says the final and fullest sign of that truth has occurred in the birth of the child Jesus.

Matthew wrote a Gospel. That is, Matthew wrote Good News. The Good News is that God is with his people. The Gospel is the story of God's action for his people in Jesus.

The Gospel begins with his birth - *Immanuel*. The Gospel ends with Jesus' word, "I am with you always, to the end of time."

That is no coincidence. Matthew brackets the good news with the fundamental truth of God's presence with his people.

A child is born whose sign-ificance is "God is with us." The child grows, becomes a man, proclaims the Kingdom, is crucified, resurrected and leaves our space-time world with the words his name *sign*-ified, "I am with you always." (Matt. 28:20).

Ahaz was not interested. The fact was he did not believe in the preserving power of God. But he did not want to admit that and so he covered up his unbelief with a clever bit of false piety. He said,

No, I will not put the Lord to the test by asking for a sign. (7:12)

Isaiah was not fooled by this apparent piety about not putting God to the test. Rather, he was exasperated. He set the record straight:

Listen, House of David, are you not content to wear out men's patience? Must you also wear out the patience of my God? Therefore the Lord Himself shall give you a sign. (7: 13-14)

And herewith comes the familiar promise associated so indelibly in our minds with the much later birth of Jesus.

A young woman is with child, and she will bear a son and will call him Immanuel. (7:14b)

In Hebrew that name means "God with us." Who bore the child and who the child was, we do not know. A Jewish tradition says the child was born to Ahaz's wife and was Hezekiah, Ahaz's son, who succeeded him. That, however, is not important. The point of the sign is simply this; a child would soon be born and before that child was weaned or in a period of two to three years, the Syrian and Israelite powers that were presently ringing Jerusalem would themselves be decimated and destroyed. Because of his lack of faith, Ahaz would not enjoy peace and prosperity, but at least at this juncture, Jerusalem and Judah would be spared. The hostile nations would come to misfortune. They need not be feared.

And every time Ahaz looked on the child he would be reminded that the God Who is for His people is the God Who is with His people.

That is the Gospel; that is good news.

Ahaz rejected the sign. He followed his own judgment, which was disastrous. He appealed to Tiglath-Pileser and the Assyrian King happily responded, moved in and reduced Judah to a vassal state. Isaiah denounced the action and predicted that Ahaz had opened the floodgates to an Assyrian takeover, which, indeed, he had.

Such is the historical context in which Isaiah's word about the sign of a child whose name was Immanuel was spoken.

We could change the names of the nations and the leaders and we might be reading the history of the late twentieth century. The Iranian Arms Deal has filled our news for a month now. Only short years after the devastation worked by the fundamentalist revolution in Iran, we are negotiating with Khomeini. Israel, whose existence is not granted by the Arab powers, becomes the middle man in a game of international intrigue that siphons off the profits of arms sale to an adversary to support a revolution in Central America. Our administration argues the necessity of such negotiation because Iran is so crucial in the larger chess game between the super powers whose nuclear arsenals are aimed at each other.

We celebrate another Advent. We live in a world with good cause for fear - *more* cause than Ahaz or even Phillips Brooks dreamed of; we live in a world whose technology has been perfected to a point where we can explode this planet.

Yet we are a people of hope. Our world has been the recipient of a sign, the sign of a child whose sign-ificance is "God with us." We live in hope because we trust in God. In God, not in Washington, or Moscow, or Geneva.

We do not despise the efforts of world leaders; we rather encourage their efforts and pray for their success. Yet, we know the world has not changed much. Still pride of nation, lust for power, drivenness of ego despoils the world. No human solution will save us; we need the intervention of God.

In the sign of a child we have the assurance of his presence with us. He has come to us; He will come to us in history's consummation; He is with us.

How we wish God would mount a bulldozer and flatten every obstacle and remove every obstruction to his Kingdom purposes. But that is not his way. He comes with all the force of a hint, with rumor of angels, with the vulnerability of a child.

It is Advent again. It is not easy to believe. Yet the choice confronts us: Will we live in hope, keeping the vision, or, in bleak despair? Will we give in to fear, to bitterness and cynicism?

Advent is a season to lift up our eyes, to await with expectation the coming of the God Who came to us in a child and promises a day when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that the child has become the Lord, the Sovereign of Nations, the Prince of Peace.

Emmanuel – God with us – the promise of God coming to us, the promise of a day when the Kingdom of this world will become the Kingdom of our God and of his Christ.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!