

## Isaiah 7:10-16

### *Isaiah Gives Ahaz the Sign of Immanuel*

<sup>10</sup> Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, <sup>11</sup> Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. <sup>12</sup> But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. <sup>13</sup> Then Isaiah said: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? <sup>14</sup> Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. <sup>15</sup> He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. <sup>16</sup> 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.

## Matthew 1:18-25

### *The Birth of Jesus the Messiah*

<sup>18</sup> Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup> But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “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. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

<sup>23</sup> “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel,”

which means, “God is with us.” <sup>24</sup> When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup> but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

## Sermon: Quiet Love

**May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.**

Our Old Testament reading contains a strange prophecy concerning a child named Emmanuel. The prophecy itself is not terribly odd, but the timing certainly is.

The prophecy was given to King Ahaz of Judah. Now, Ahaz was not a terribly faithful King. He had led God’s people astray, and while king Ahaz did claim YHWH as his God, he also claimed Baal and Ashera as gods and worshipped them. Needless to say, this leads to trouble and Ahaz is finding himself under siege.

King Pekah from the northern kingdom of Israel was trying to attack Jerusalem, and King Rezin of Aram is also knocking on Judah’s door. This situation leads to all kinds of political intrigue – Ahaz makes a deal with the Babylonians for protection, everyone goes to war, and within a generation the Aramites take Israel, the Babylonians take Judah – everything falls apart and the Jews are in exile.

What a mess. But, God says, though all of this is coming – and it is your fault – the story will not end. I will not leave you in this mess.

Of course, it’s not that easy; we already know that Ahaz is not terribly faithful to God, and though God asks Ahaz to come to him and seek his will, Ahaz refuses. It sounds a little like false humility, with Ahaz saying to God – I don’t want to put you to the test, to which God replied ‘everyone else is tired of your words, are you going to do the same to me as well?’

God proceeds to tell Ahaz through Isaiah that there is hope, that he will remember his promise to have one from the house of David on the throne of Israel, and that one is coming. He will be born of a maiden and named Emmanuel and by the time this Emmanuel comes, both kingdoms that are presently threatening you will be no more.

This is a message of hope – but an odd one. Isaiah never mentions a time frame in his prophecy, and it’s well that he didn’t because he might have been run out of town. Most prophecies were fulfilled within the lifetimes of the ones

who received it – that’s how people know that it was indeed a word from God. This prophecy, however, was not to be fulfilled for 600 years.

When it was fulfilled, a young maiden gave birth to a son in a stable in Bethlehem, a son named Emmanuel whom we know as Jesus.

But when the sign finally came it caused some problems, especially for Joseph. We don’t often consider Joseph – he’s always forgotten, always in the background. When we think of the birth of Jesus images of the baby and mother are usually the focus. In paintings of Mary and the child, Joseph is often absent. If he is shown, he seems set off uncomfortably to one side.

When you think of Christmas pageants the images that probably come to mind are of Mary and the baby Jesus, the three kings bearing gifts, shepherds and angels, maybe even oxen and sheep. Joseph almost seems like an afterthought. Nobody really gets excited about being chosen as Joseph. Today let’s talk about Joseph, because he has much to teach us.

The season leading up to that first Christmas was a tough one for Joseph. He was engaged to his love, Mary. There was a wedding coming up, a new home to prepare, kids would follow soon after. Joseph was a carpenter, a trade likely learned from his own father and he was getting ready to start his life as an adult. And then something happened.

Mary told him she was pregnant. He knew it wasn’t his. All of a sudden his life plan is over before it even began. His ideas of his new home, new wife, new family are done. This is a pretty crushing blow that is usually glossed over – we like to talk about the miracle and Mary but we forget poor Joseph who feels as though he has just lost everything.

So what does he do? He’s got a couple of options to think about. He can charge his wife with adultery. This would vindicate his honor – he would then have no part of this pregnancy before marriage, the whole community would realize that he was a victim in this matter, he had nothing to do with this shameful situation. But if he did that, if he officially charged Mary, then she would be sentenced to death by stoning. As much as he must have felt betrayed and crushed, he still didn’t want the love of his life to be killed.

Instead, Joseph decides to quietly send Mary away. He has given up on the marriage, he has accepted his own loss, but doesn’t want Mary to be harmed by an angry mob. It would seem that from the start, Joseph is a quiet peaceful man. He doesn’t want to publicly proclaim he has been wronged; he doesn’t want to seek revenge. He just wants to take care of this problem and move on. Righteousness tempered with mercy.

Perhaps we think he’s being a little harsh, even though he has chosen the more merciful option. After all, Mary swears that she hasn’t been unfaithful – it’s God’s baby, not the baker’s. Would any of us believe that? I like to think that I have a pretty solid faith, but if Kyoungsoo came home one day and said that God made her pregnant I’d have a tough time accepting it. I would believe her if she said God told her that we have to spend two hours a day in prayer and 3 days a week feeding the hungry, but a child? Really?

It was even tougher for Joseph. At least Kyoungsoo could point to Mary and say that this kind of thing had happened before, it could happen again. Back in Joseph’s day, God had never done something like this, there was no precedent. There were a few prophecies, like the one given to Ahaz. Joseph had likely heard them before, and many of the Jews were waiting for a Messiah, but this is still a hard thing to accept.

God saw Joseph’s struggle, and sent him a message to encourage him. That message came in the form of a dream.

But just when he had resolved to do this (send Mary away), an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “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.”

This angel names Joseph, showing that he knows him, and then tells him to keep Mary as his bride to be since the baby really is from God through the Holy Spirit.

Something extraordinary has just happened to this ordinary, righteous man – he’s just received an amazing revelation. So, how does Joseph respond to this extraordinary news? He responds like the ordinary, righteous man that he was. When he awoke from his dream, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded. Period. Joseph was a righteous man. He spent his entire life trying to follow God’s commands. Out of a lifetime of devotion to God and to following God’s law, Joseph knew when he was being given a message from God. He needed no extra words, no extra explanations.

The young Mary, when she received her revelation from the angel, quite naturally asked, “How can this be?” But not Joseph. The angel of the Lord told him he should take Mary as his wife and name their child Jesus, that is exactly what he did. No extra arguing or cajoling. No extra explanations. Joseph, an ordinary man, a faithful man, a man of few words, did what the Lord commanded him to do. He had been doing it his entire life.

It is this quiet, solid faith of Joseph that I want to bring to our attention this morning. Not flashy, not showy. He’s a background character, but so important. What if he had not listened? What if he had decided instead to clear his name and seek vengeance – accusing his wife in public and having her stoned – cancelling the first Christmas before it even happened?

But no, Joseph obeys without making a fuss. And this obedient faith is why God speaks to him twice more. When the magi showed up at Herod’s castle looking for a new king Herod was enraged. God sent Joseph and his family to safety in Egypt – again through a dream. He knew Solid Joe would listen and act at once.

When it was time to come home, again Joseph had a dream, and on the way home another dream directed him to settle in Galilee. Each time, Joseph did what was asked with no hesitation, no reservation, no fuss. He does what is required, then returns to taking care of his family, serving in the background. Uncelebrated, and largely unknown. Even when he dies, he remains in the background – we never hear of it. He is briefly mentioned as having been worried when Jesus remained in Jerusalem when he was 12, then we never hear of Joseph again. Jesus’ mother and brothers are talked about, but never again Joseph.

The wonder of this story is that through the faithfulness of an ordinary man, God was doing something extraordinary. Joseph was a faithful man, but he didn’t need to make a big show of it. He listened for God’s word, and he tried to follow it. When God spoke to Joseph, Joseph got up and did all that the Lord commanded. He married Mary. He got them to Bethlehem. He named the child Jesus. He got them away from Herod, and back home again.

I think if I had the chance to meet Joseph I would have really like him. Solid, no-nonsense, dependable, faithful. Loving, raising, and protecting a child who wasn’t even his. Ordinary Joe. Extraordinary Joe. Not seeking glory, but just living a good life, caring for those around him, obeying God. And through this ordinary man’s faithful obedience God worked out his plan for the salvation of the whole world. I pray in this last week of Advent that we can all be a little more like Joseph.

Amen.