

ISAIAH 7:1-14

OOPS! Advent sometimes is an anxious time.

Even in this Advent season, which is to be a time of hope and expectation, I don't know if it's just me, but I sense that fear and worry and anxiety still prevail. And there is plenty to be afraid of, isn't there? Since I had my heart surgery, I've made it a policy not to watch or listen to the news while doing my exercises. Here I am, trying to work off some of the stress of the day, and then you've got the news just making it worse.

Yes, it's pretty easy to become afraid of what this world is coming to, and that's not to mention all of the cares and concerns of daily life that you are facing, and all the other pressures put upon us by the commercial interests about what we need to be happy in this life, especially during this, as Pastor Radtke called it yesterday, this madness called the Christmas season. Sometimes it just seems to be too much. And it can get us down.

But you know what? God does not leave us without hope. The final verse of our lesson this morning is a powerful reminder of the goodness and mercy of God. For we hear again those special words so often repeated during this season: "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel—God with us."

What a blessing to remember that, according to our text this morning, in spite of the concerns and anxiety that afflict us

THE PROMISE OF GOD'S PRESENCE GIVES US HOPE IN A FEARFUL WORLD

UGH! In a sense, anxiety is idolatry

Now, this prophecy of Isaiah took place during the time when King Ahaz was ruling Judah. He was a particularly evil king. We read in Second Kings and Second Chronicles that Ahaz, "unlike David . . . did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord his God." He ruled during a time when Judah was under great threat of invasion from all sides. But instead of turning to the one true God for help, he chased after about every version of idol worship that he could come up with, casting bronze idols to use in Baal worship, offering sacrifices all over the place, at every high place and on the hilltops and under every large tree. In his zeal for help from the false gods he even committed the detestable atrocity of sacrificing his sons in the fire.

In spite of all Ahaz' religious efforts, all the apparent piety and appeals to the false gods, things, of course, just went from bad to worse for Ahaz and Judah, and Ahaz became even more unfaithful to the Lord. Finally he shut down the temple of God, and took all the furnishings and set up altars at every street corner in Jerusalem and in every town in Judah, to worship other gods, even the gods of those armies that were defeating him. That is how far his apostasy ran.

Now all of this happened, in spite of the fact that God repeatedly tried to encourage Ahaz and strengthen him and call him back unto himself, into the one true faith. And that is why God sends Isaiah here to Ahaz, in our text for today, to again try to encourage him to believe in the mercy and the goodness of the one true God.

Our text says that when Ahaz and the people of Judah heard that Syria (Aram) and Israel (Ephraim) were forming an alliance to attack Judah and take it over and install their own king, it says that they became so overwhelmed by fear that "the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind." What an interesting way of describing

the great fear, the dread, the overwhelming anxiety that Ahaz and the people of Judah were feeling!

But this is not what God desires for Judah. God does not want Judah to be afraid, he wants Judah to know that he is still the God of the heavens and the earth and that he will remain faithful to his promises to keep and protect the line of David. So Isaiah goes to Ahaz and tries to assure him that things are still under the control of the one true God. He offers him four assuring, gentle admonitions: “Take heed, calm down, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps.” It’s as if to say, why are you allowing yourself to get so overwhelmed by worry over these two kingdoms, when they are nothing, nothing, compared to my power and love and mercy toward you?

But evidently Ahaz would not be comforted, but rather chose to continue wallowing in his downward spiral of apostasy and the self-inflicted torture of fear and hopelessness. God is speaking right in his face here through the prophet Isaiah, but he just doesn’t hear it. It reminds me of what John Bunyan called the slough of despond. The thing about the slough of despond is that you get so mired down in your fear and your doubt and your despondency that the more you try to work yourself out of it with your own efforts, the more you find yourself stuck in it.

But God’s mercy and goodness is so great, that he sends Isaiah again to Ahaz, to tell him, “Look, I want to prove to you that I am with you, and that I will take care of things, and that you need not fear, that you can have hope, right here, right now. Ask of me any sign, no matter how great or difficult, and I will perform it, to prove to you that you can trust in me.” But again, Ahaz would not.

King Ahaz found himself overwhelmed and mired in this hopeless despondency, where he thought everything is bad, everything is disaster, and that he must frantically search in all directions, try anything, do everything within his own power, even make unholy alliances with unworthy and evil enemies, to try to get himself and Judah out of this situation.

Ahaz was involved in gross idolatry, but I wonder how often we are involved in idolatry that might not involve burning our children in sacrifice, or setting up altars to false gods, or using the holy utensils of our chapel here for Baal worship. But there is, perhaps, a more subtle form of idolatry. I mean, why is it that we allow ourselves to slump around campus as if we had the weight of the world on our shoulders. Why is it that instead of reflecting the joy and the praise and hope of our Psalm today, where all creation is called upon to praise the Lord, we act as if our problems are just too big, just too complicated, just too serious for the God we say with our mouths that we worship?

You know what? That is idolatry, because getting caught up in the slough of despond means that we are trusting in something other than God. Luther said, commenting on this passage: “Idolatry consists in believing someone else rather than God alone. The Christian religion consists in believing in the mercy and goodness of God for Christ’s sake. This religion is pure and sincere; everything else is idolatry, even though it uses the name of the true God as a cover.” When we are caught up in the slough of despond, we don’t hear the word of God, even when it is right in front of our face.

AHA! But God’s goodness prevails even in anxious times.

But the greatness of God’s mercy and goodness toward us, does not fail. King Ahaz did not even want a sign from God. He refused it. But you know what? God gave him a sign anyway: “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and

bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel”—God with us. This describes the kind of person it will be. He is indeed the Son of a virgin, and yet he is “God with us,” therefore he is God and man, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

WHEE! God gives us hope in the face of fear.

What a wonderful promise we have through the prophet Isaiah this day and every day. God’s presence provided for us through his Son, Jesus Christ. God, who would take all of our rebellion, our apostasy, our idolatry, our despondency, and nail them to the cross that this child promised here in Isaiah would one day face.

That promise of the presence of God is what gives us hope in a fearful world. That promise of the presence of God is what gives us hope in spite of our doubts and the temptations to fall into the slough of despond, in spite of all the false attractions and idols and enticements offered to us by the world, during this madness called the Christmas season.

And that hope that we can have is a sure thing, it’s not just wishful thinking, as Rev. Stiegemeyer so eloquently pointed out earlier this week. The sign of this child to be born with the name God-With-Us means that God indeed is with us, and he forgives us, and he gives us life and hope, in the knowledge that with the child, God gives us all things, and we need not fear or fall into the utter despair and hopelessness of poor King Ahaz. As Luther said, “It is a sign of lifting up and building up and strengthening for those who believe.”

YEAH! In hope we praise God.

And so, we can apply those words of Isaiah to ourselves, can’t we? “Take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint.” And we can join the heavens, and the angles, and the sun and the moon and the stars, and the sea creatures and the fire and the hail and the snow and the mountains and the trees and the beasts of the land and flying birds and the kings of the earth and all peoples and princes and rulers of the earth, young and old alike in praise to God, for he has given us the promise, he has raised up a horn for his people! Yes,

THE PROMISE OF GOD’S PRESENCE GIVES US HOPE IN A FEARFUL WORLD