

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
December 22, 2013  
Fourth Sunday of Advent  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 7:10-17  
Psalm 24:1-7  
Romans 1:1-7  
Matthew 1:18-25

Our lessons for today on this fourth Sunday of Advent reveal to us a study in contrast. We are introduced to two figures who struggle to believe God's promise. Our Old Testament lesson shows us king Ahaz, and our Gospel lesson shows us Joseph, the man engaged to be married to Mary.

You may recall that Jewish marriage had three stages. First the parents picked out the couple; then came a betrothal, a public ceremony with vows, etc; and the betrothal was followed by a one year period before the couple actually came together as husband and wife.

Mary and Joseph were in the *betrothal* stage. They were considered married, and this is why the text speaks of Joseph agonizing over the option of divorce when Mary comes to him and tells him she is pregnant.

When Mary comes to Joseph with this news, it means she has broken her marriage vow. And with it, she has broken Joseph's heart.

The Old Testament law in Deuteronomy stipulated two options for Joseph in this situation: public stoning, or divorce. If Joseph sued Mary for divorce, it

would involve the public legal process which would expose Mary to great embarrassment and humiliation.

Joseph's other divorce option was to present Mary a bill of divorce and avoid the public proceedings. Undo the marriage quietly and get on with life.

In the process of trying to figure out what to do, Joseph decides to "sleep on it." As he is sleeping, he has a dream. In the dream an angel appears and says, "Joseph, don't be afraid to go ahead with your marriage to Mary. For the child within her has been conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

And now Joseph is faced with a choice. Does he say "yes," or does he say "no?"

Just prior to this, Mary was confronted with a similar choice. A visitation announcing that she would become the mother of God and give birth to the Savior of the world. She could have said, "no." But she said yes.

And now, Joseph also says "yes." He could have found a thousand excuses to say "no," but in the end, perhaps against all reason, he found a way to say "yes." Joseph said yes -- and a miracle began.

King Ahaz was faced with a similar decision in our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah, but his circumstances were much different from those of Joseph. Ahaz was an evil man and a wicked king. He was a schemer and a manipulator.

He had very little interest in leading the people in the ways of their covenant relationship with God.

When we are introduced to him here in Isaiah 7, Ahaz is shaking in his boots out of fear. Word has come that two rival kings have positioned themselves against him and are preparing to invade his kingdom. The prophet Isaiah confronts Ahaz and calls on him to have faith in God for deliverance. Instead, Ahaz tries to fix the situation by forming an alliance with human rulers for protection.

In spite of this hubris and unbelief, God continues to deal with Ahaz. In our text, he sends word to Ahaz and says, “ask me for a sign to prove to you that I will help you and deliver you.”

Ahaz’ response appears on the surface to be one of humility: “No, I wouldn’t test the Lord like that...”

But in truth, his response is not one of humility, but one of *unbelief*. In spite of God’s repeated overtures to him, Ahaz refuses to believe and wants to do it his way. He is unwilling -- or unable -- to trust God and to believe God’s promise.

And so we have two men who react very differently to God’s promise in their lives, and to the challenge of faith that comes with believing that promise. Joseph is faced with the challenge of believing that God is working through Mary’s unexpected pregnancy.

Ahaz is also challenged and invited to believe God for his deliverance. But for reasons unknown to us, he refuses to believe. He cannot -- or will not -- lay claim to the promise.

Now I believe that there are two miracles at work here today. Obviously, the story of Joseph and his decision to trust in God in the face of an impossible situation could be considered a miracle. So much so that we might say that Christmas did not begin with a day, but with a *word*. Christmas began when Joseph (and Mary) said “yes.”

But there is perhaps an even greater miracle at work here, a miracle found in the story of Ahaz.

Listen to Isaiah:

*Listen well, you royal family of David! You aren't satisfied to exhaust my patience. You exhaust the patience of God as well! All right, then, the LORD himself will choose the sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel -- 'God is with us.' By the time this child is old enough to eat curds and honey, he will know enough to choose what is right and reject what is wrong. But before he knows right from wrong, the two kings you fear so much -- the kings of Israel and Aram -- will both be dead. [vv. 13-16]*

Here we have a second miracle, a miracle perhaps greater than the first. Ahaz is not ready to trust in God's saving power. Ahaz is not ready to believe. And it's not enough that he won't believe -- he also clothes his unbelief in pious, spiritual language (“I would not tempt the Lord like that...”).

Ahaz is not ready to believe...

But guess what? *God is not dependent upon our belief or unbelief.* God sends the sign of promise anyway. And in so doing, God makes clear his resolve to come to us and to be with us *despite our unbelief!*

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, God's promised Son is drawing near to us. The signs of God's promise are all around us. If it were up to me, my prayer and wish for all of you would be that you would be like Joseph, that you would find a way to say "yes" to the promise in spite of all the challenges to doing so. That you would open your hearts to the possibility of something greater than what you can see and hear with your physical eyes and ears.

But wonder of wonders, even if you say "no" to it all today, God's mind is made up. God is coming anyway. God is resolved to be "with us," even in our unbelief. God will not stop loving us, God will not stop reaching out to us. God will continue to call us to repent, to change, to believe his promise. This too is a miracle. The miracle of Immanuel -- *God with us.*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.