

Advent: The season leading up to Christmas has become so materialistic. We are bombarded with advertisements to spend, spend, spend. We see images of piles of gifts placed under the Christmas tree, big expensive vehicles wrapped with a bow in our driveways. The pressure of buying gifts drains the joy out of the season. Our modern observance of the birth of Jesus stands in stark contrast to the images we find in the birth stories in the gospels. A simple stable. A poor couple from Nazareth. In this Advent season, make a commitment to minimize spending. Find simple ways to observe the Holiday.

The Advent Wreath

The Advent Wreath captures the themes of this season - Preparation and Joy. As we light the candles of the Advent wreath our anticipation builds and grows until we arrive at our remembrance of the birth of Jesus on Christmas Day. The 4 Candles traditionally represent 4 themes of the Advent Season – Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. The fourth candle on the Advent wreath is the Love Candle.

Reading: **1 John 4:7-21**

Prayer – Dear God, In this season of the year, we see many expressions of love and kindness. People give to charity organizations; People give food and other gifts to those in need. People express sincere wishes for a Happy Holiday and blessed New year. It lifts our spirits to see people behaving so kindly to one another. But Lord we are troubled that this is more often an exception to the usual pattern of life. Outside of this season, we see too much discord, uncivility, stubbornness, slander, name calling. We long for a world where people really care about each other, where people love each other. You have given us a model of love. You left heaven and came into the world to be one of us, to provide a pathway to yourself. Thank you. Forgive us when we fail to love. As we draw closer to the Christmas Holiday, fill our hearts with Your love. Amen.

Scripture **Isaiah 7:1 -17**

Message: Christmas Hope from Isaiah, Part 4

Why would we celebrate the birth of a child born 2000 years ago? As Christians we affirm that Jesus was not an ordinary person. We believe that He was a man, a human, but **we believe He was much more than that. We believe that He is deity, God in the flesh.** We believe that He became one of us (took on flesh; Incarnation) in order to bring salvation to us. Are these beliefs just nice sayings? Is there any truth to these facts? What proof can we offer that Jesus was someone different and special? How do we convince someone who does not think that Jesus was anything more than an ordinary human so that they too will put their faith in Him.

We have been looking at some prophetic passages from the book of Isaiah. Prophecies anticipating the fulfillment of God's promise to send a Savior (Messiah) into the world. Today we are looking at this passage that anticipates the birth of Jesus to a Virgin. Let me share a **little background** to the passage. This prophecy came to Isaiah during the reign of Ahaz as the King of Judah. The people of God were divided into 2 kingdoms. The **northern kingdom was known as Israel.** The nation of Israel was unfaithful to the Lord. They had abandoned the worship of God for worship of idols. They engaged in many of the evil practices of other evil nations around them. The **southern Kingdom was known as Judah.** Judah was more faithful and obedient than their brother kingdom, Israel. Some of the kings of Judah were unfaithful like the kings of Israel, but some of their kings were good. They worshiped and obeyed God more faithfully than Israel. **The kingdom of Judah was under the threat of attack.** Israel and Damascus (Syria) had formed an alliance and intended to attack Judah and take them over. verse 2 says, "**Aram (Damascus) has allied itself with Ephraim (Israel); so the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind.**" God instructed Isaiah to go to Ahaz and assure him that there is nothing to fear. "**Be careful, keep calm and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart.**"

⁷ thus says the Lord GOD:

**“It shall not stand,
and it shall not come to pass.**

**⁸ For the head of Syria is Damascus,
and the head of Damascus is Rezin.**

**And within sixty-five years
Ephraim will be shattered from being a people.**

**⁹ And the head of Ephraim is Samaria,
and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah.**

**If you[Ⓜ] are not firm in faith,
you will not be firm at all.”**

Then Isaiah challenges Ahaz. Ask the Lord to give you a sign, so that you will be sure that God is going to deliver you from your enemies. Isaiah says **“Ask a sign of the LORD your[Ⓜ] God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.”**

But Ahaz refuses to ask for a sign. Ahaz was an unfaithful king. He had turned his back away from the Lord. His response is quite hypocritical “I will not put the Lord to the test.” It sounds like he is being spiritual and holy, but it was just for show. He did not care if he would dishonor God or not. The commentary on his life in the book of Chronicles says **“he did not do what was right. He made idols, burned sacrifices to other gods; he practiced child sacrifice”** Ahaz did not care about respecting the Lord. Ahaz had another reason for refusing to ask for a sign. He had already formed an alliance with the Assyrians to protect and defend Judah and to attack those who were threatening him. He did not trust God’s promise to deliver him and Judah. **He felt safer trusting his own plan than trusting in Isaiah’s God.**

Isaiah gives him a sign. **¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.[Ⓜ] ¹⁵ He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶ For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted.**

This is a difficult passage to interpret. The difficulty starts with Isaiah’s use of the word that is translated virgin. He does not use the typical word for Virgin, but instead uses a word that could be translated “Young Girl”. But it means more specifically a young girl who was of marriageable age, who was a virgin. The sign is to be a sign to Ahaz. We have no evidence that there was a young girl in Ahaz’s day who gave birth to a child that Isaiah might be referring to. But we must assume that was the case. Isaiah wants Ahaz to know that by the time a child born in Ahaz’s day would reach the age of accountability, these two nations – Syria and Israel – would fall, destroyed by the Assyrians. That is the sign for Ahaz.

But there is another meaning here. What does this have to do with us? As is often the case with Old Testament prophecies we can see multiple fulfillments. The New Testament writers see in this prophecy a reference to the birth of Jesus. **When the angel comes to inform Joseph about Mary’s pregnancy the angel refers to this word from Isaiah. “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”**

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

**²³ “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel”**

(which means, God with us).

When we recite the words of the Apostle’s Creed, we declare that we believe Jesus was conceived the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary. Isaiah’s prophecy refers to the future birth of the Savior Jesus. **The miraculous conception and birth of Jesus is the proof, the evidence that we are looking for that Jesus was more than an ordinary human being.** Isaiah says that this baby would be given the title **Immanuel** which means God with us.

There are many who doubt or question to concept of the Virgin Birth of Jesus. It seems impossible to us and it is. But for God, all things are possible. The birth of Jesus to a young Jewish girl who had never had relations with a man would be evidence that God was now invading our world to accomplish His purpose. We are challenged to trust Jesus as the One who has come into our world in such a miraculous way. The one conceived by the Holy Spirit and born to a Virgin is the One we must believe in. Amen

Blessing:

May the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be upon you and remain with you for ever. Amen