

Fourth Sunday in Advent; December 18, 2022

Isaiah 7:1-14

“Let’s Unwrap a Gift We Truly Need”

This took place in the days when Ahaz, the son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, was king of Judah. Rezin king of Aram, and Pekah son of Remaliah, the king of Israel, marched up to Jerusalem to wage war against it, but they could not capture it.

The house of David was told, “Aram has allied itself with Ephraim.” The heart of Ahaz trembled, and the heart of his people trembled as the trees of the forest tremble in the wind.

Then the LORD said to Isaiah:

Go out now and meet Ahaz, you and your son Shear Jashub. Meet him at the end of the water channel from the upper pool, on the road that goes to the launderers field.

Tell Ahaz, “Get control of yourself, and remain calm. Do not be afraid. Do not lose courage because of these two stubs of smoldering torches. Do not be afraid because of the fierce anger of Rezin, Aram, and the son of Remaliah, even though Aram, Ephraim, and the son of Remaliah have plotted evil against you and said, ‘Let’s go up against Judah and tear it apart. Let’s divide it among ourselves and set up a king over it, namely, this son of Tabe’el.’”

This is what the LORD God says.

Their plan shall not succeed.

It shall not take place.

**Yes, the head of Aram is Damascus,
and the head of Damascus is Rezin,
but within sixty-five years Ephraim will be broken into pieces,
so that it will no longer be a people.**

**The head of Ephraim is only Samaria,
and the head of Samaria is only Remaliah’s son.**

**If you do not stand firm in faith,
you will not stand at all.**

The LORD spoke to Ahaz again. He said, “Ask for a sign from the LORD your God. Ask for it either in the depths below or in the heights above.”

But Ahaz responded, “I will not ask. I will not test the LORD.”

So Isaiah said:

Listen now, you house of David. Is it not enough for you to test the patience of men? Will you test the patience of my God as well? Therefore the LORD himself will give a sign for you. Look! The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and name him Immanuel.

Like many children, I had a very hard time waiting until Christmas to open my presents. Unlike many children, I was a little sneak of a child who decided to do something to satisfy my impatience. I opened my Christmas presents early for most of my childhood. I became an expert at it. I had opening presents early down to a science.

In order to open a Christmas present early, you need the right tools and the right time. You need at least twenty minutes of clearance in order to open one present safely. You need a virtual guarantee that everyone in your family

is gone, and will not return until you're through with the process. Even then, you need to keep your ears open for the sound of a car engine coming up the driveway. And as for tools, the very best is the deluxe Swiss Army Knife. It has everything an early gift-opener needs.

As for the actual unwrapping, you first need to assess the position and quantity of tape, as well as the quality of paper. The less tape, the faster and easier the job will be. The cheaper the paper, the more careful you'll have to be; cheaper paper is more likely to tear during this delicate process. Using a thin knife, create a wedge between the pieces of tape and the paper, being extremely careful not to rip any paper. If you rip the paper, you're done for. After lifting one edge of the tape from the paper, switch to the tweezers and lift the tape the rest of the way off. This makes it less likely that you will tear the tape or the paper from here on out.

Once one side of the paper is opened, very carefully slide the present out the side, while maintaining the original shape of the paper. Crumpling or bending the paper will give you away. After satisfying your curiosity, gently slide the package back into the paper's original form and reseal, making sure that the tape sticks in its original position. No matter how good you are at unwrapping presents early, be safe. When repositioning the gift under the tree, turn the tampered-with portion toward the wall, or, failing that, the trunk of the tree. Finally, remember to act surprised on Christmas morning.

And that's how you unwrap a Christmas present early. If you have a problem with me doing this demonstration (as certain types usually do), consider this fact. I am not the first person to unwrap a Christmas gift and take a look at it early. In fact, there is sound Biblical precedent for unwrapping Christmas gifts early – way early, as a matter of fact. Not just a few weeks ahead of time; no, 750 years ahead of time. 750 years before the very first Christmas, the prophet Isaiah unwrapped the greatest gift of all and gave God's people a peek at the gift of the Savior. And today, we'll see what the prophet Isaiah unwrapped: the one gift we truly need. So, I know it's not quite Christmas yet, but let's go ahead and unwrap the gift we truly need.

When Isaiah unwrapped that gift, he was speaking to King Ahaz of Judah. King Ahaz was in trouble, under attack from two kings who had formed an alliance against him. After they attacked the first time, King Ahaz and the people of Judah were afraid. Isaiah says they were shaking like leaves on a tree. So God sent Isaiah to try to calm nervous King Ahaz down. When it came to these enemy kings and their plans to overrun Judah, God's prophet Isaiah said to King Ahaz, **"Get control of yourself, and remain calm...Their plan shall not succeed. It shall not take place."**

And then God made King Ahaz a remarkable offer. In order for Ahaz to be absolutely certain that no one would conquer him, Isaiah told King Ahaz, **"Ask for a sign from the LORD your God. Ask for it either in the depths below or in the heights above."**

Normally, God tells his people not to ask him for signs. Normally, he says, "Just trust me and my Word." But this time, God made an exception. In this case, God actually commanded Ahaz to ask for a sign. But Ahaz refused. He said, **"I will not ask. I will not test the LORD."** Again, that would normally be the right attitude when it comes to asking God for a sign. But in this case, it was the wrong attitude, because God had told Ahaz to ask for one. Ahaz refused to ask because he just didn't care what God said.

But even though King Ahaz refused to ask for one, the Lord said, "Too bad. You don't want a sign? You're going to get one anyway." And then the Holy Spirit gave Isaiah this sign to put before King Ahaz, even though he didn't want it: **"Look! The virgin will conceive and give birth to son and name him Immanuel."** That's a strange sounding sign, isn't it? What did this sign mean for Ahaz?

It takes at least nine months for a virgin to get pregnant, carry a child to term, and give birth. So here's what the sign of the virgin birth meant for King Ahaz: Within nine months, King Ahaz, it will be so clear to the people of your country that God is protecting them; it will be so clear in under a year that God is defending you and defeating your enemies,

that if a virgin got pregnant today, in nine months when she would give birth, she would name her child "Immanuel," which means, "God with us." Within nine months God will make it so clear that he is on your side that a new mother in your land would give birth and naturally name her child, "God with us."

And so God designed this sign to calm the faithless heart of a king long ago, and assure him that God would protect his people. But we have to wonder, why didn't Isaiah just say, "In nine months your enemies will be defeated?" Why frame that promise with talk of a virgin giving birth and a son named "Immanuel"? Why? Because Isaiah was not only trying to calm King Ahaz's heart; he was also doing some early unwrapping.

Isaiah was also looking ahead to a future birth by an actual virgin of an actual boy who would literally be "God with us." Isaiah's sign is a prophecy with two points to it: one point of the sign was to calm Ahaz and Judah; the other was to unwrap the gift of the Christchild.

And what did Isaiah reveal about the Messiah as he peeled up the tape and peeled back the paper on God's gift?

He revealed God giving the gift of himself: God Almighty coming to live with us as one of us. And in Jesus Christ we see this prophecy fulfilled perfectly and fully. Jesus is born of a human mother on Christmas. But she is also a virgin, just as Isaiah said, with no human father. Instead, he is conceived by the Holy Spirit. So he comes as a boy born from a woman. But he also comes as God, conceived by the Holy Spirit. God comes to dwell among the creatures he created.

As Isaiah unwraps this gift, we find the only possible Savior from our sins. We need a Savior who is a human, to live perfectly and die in the place of us human beings. And we need a Savior who is God, because no one less than God could live a perfect life and pay for the sins of all people. So as we unwrap this gift with Isaiah, we find the gift we truly need: a Savior who is true God and true man, God with us to save us from our sins. Isaiah unwrapped the perfect gift, the one gift that we positively cannot do without.

When people ask you what you want for Christmas, what sorts of things do you ask for? Are you the kind of person who asks for things you need for Christmas, or strictly for things you want? There are those who say that getting what you need for Christmas is no fun. You really ought to ask only for wants for Christmas. You shouldn't ask for socks. Christmas is a time to get what you want. Honestly, though, if we gave like God on Christmas, we would give people what they need the most.

God is more interested in giving us what we need than what we want. The gift of Immanuel, unwrapped early by Isaiah, and unwrapped every Christmas since, is the gift we need, the one we have to have. That's not an easy thing for our hearts to hear. Our pride resents the thought of a gift that we have to have, a gift that we are damned without.

It's not a pleasant thing to do, but we need to see how much we need him. Before this gift comes to us, we need to spend some time staring down the barrel of God's law. We need to let God's law do its work and smash whatever pride is in our hearts, pride that says, "A Savior? For me? Am I really that terrible of a person that nothing less than God Almighty can save me?"

We like to think that we're not such bad people. We like to think there are many worse people out there than we are, so God doesn't pay much attention to what we do wrong. And he surely wouldn't send nice people like us to hell. Hell is for Hitler and Stalin and Pol Pot, not nice neighborly polite quiet folks like you and me.

But the truth is that every last one of us, from the tiniest baby to the sweetest little old lady, is eternal dead meat without the gift Immanuel. Because each one of us has taken the commands of God and stomped all over them, by what we say that we should not, what we do that we should not, what we think that we should not. And not only that, we defile the holy commands of God by failing to do what we should, say what we should, and think what we should.

How many times have you given something other than God your highest love and attention? God says that loving anything more than him, even for one instant, earns hellfire. How many times have you thrown God's name around like a rag, like it didn't mean anything? Even once, God says, and you've earned a ticket to hell. Backtalk to your parents? Disrespect behind a teacher's back? Envy or resentment for a coworker? Dirty thoughts? That's right, thoughts count, too, in God's book. Turn your ear toward any gossip, even one word? Pass on any chances to stick up for someone who was being trashed? Any bitterness toward God when life doesn't go the way you want, instead of constant thanks and praise?

The longer we spend looking at God's standard for our lives, the clearer it becomes that we have committed countless sins just in our thoughts, let alone our words and deeds. And God does not grade our lives on a curve, comparing us to other sinners. God has only one standard: absolute perfection always.

It hurts to think of ourselves as deserving hell. But we have to see that's the way it is. Only then can we understand just how much we really do need Immanuel, God with us and for us. His law leaves no room for thoughts of not really needing Immanuel. God's law wipes those ideas out, and only leaves us calling out for God's help, ready to receive his salvation as his gift. We need the Savior who came to be one of us, who took those commandments of God and went through life perfectly and died for us. We need the Savior who is truly God with us, who has the ability to live that perfect life, the power to pay for all sin.

We need him. And God gave him. And by faith, we have the benefit of everything God with Us has done for us. The exact Gift that we cannot do without, has been given by God's grace. He gives this gift so that instead of cowering under the demands of God's law, we stand in his grace, and keep his commands joyfully; so that instead of shaking at the thought of his wrath and threats, we live as his beloved children; and instead of trembling at the thought of hell, we look confidently forward to heaven. We hold the baby Immanuel in our arms, with his cross in clear view and say, "Thank God for God with Us. Thank God he gives me what I so desperately needed."

He is unwrapped by Isaiah, sent by God, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of a virgin. Born to live and die for us. He is the gift we need – and have: Immanuel, God with Us. Amen.