

"See the Sign?"

Isaiah 7:10-17

December 19, 2010

4th Sunday In Advent

Signs and symbols can be very helpful for us in our understanding of circumstances and events. But the meaning of such signs and symbols depends on who you are and how you view the sign. For example, pinching your index finger and thumb together and holding up three fingers means “okay” here in America. However, in other parts of the world, the very same sign is viewed as an obscenity (similar to our one finger salute here). Another example is a police siren. For robbers, the flashing red and blue lights and the loud wailing noise are a sign that they are in trouble and probably will be arrested. For those who are in trouble and need help, that exact same sign means that help is on the way.

The sign in our text for today of a virgin birth is a beloved part of the Christmas story. Of course, we think of it as a sign of good for us. But, again, the meaning of a sign depends on who you are and how you see it. To understand this sign for our lives, we must go back in time to the context in which it was given – a time 700 years before the birth of Christ.

King Ahaz of the southern Kingdom of Judah was an unbeliever and one of the most evil kings in all of Judah’s history. He worshiped the false gods of the nations around him and even sacrificed his own son to them. God threatened judgment against him. Rezin, king of Syria, and Pekah, king of Israel had formed an alliance against Judah. They lay siege to the city of Jerusalem and were determined, not only to destroy the city, but the entire nation of Judah.

Ahaz should have trusted the Lord to rescue Him. But, being an idolater, he didn’t. Instead, he went to the king of Assyria, asking for his help and plundering the silver and the gold of the temple to offer the king for his help.

The Lord sent Isaiah to Ahaz to reach out to him with help and hope. Isaiah told him not to fear and that the plan of Ahaz's enemies would fail. Ahaz should just stand firm in faith and trust the Lord to do this.

But Ahaz did not believe the Lord's promise. The Lord then commanded him, "Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be as deep as Sheol or high in heaven." In other words, ask for a sign – any sign – to confirm the Lord's promise. But Ahaz refused. He piously pretended that he would not ask for a sign and put the Lord to the test. But, in fact, he did not believe, preferring the help of Assyria to believing in the Lord. This offer of a sign would be an unwarranted intrusion into his plans.

The Lord gave Ahaz the sign anyway, "Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." Was this a sign of bad or good? Had he trusted in the Lord, it would have been a very good sign. Isaiah says that before a new child could know the difference between good and evil, Syria and Israel would be gone. Ahaz and the nation of Judah would be safe. But, because Ahaz refused to believe the Lord, worse trouble than Syria and Israel would come upon Judah. The king of Assyria, instead of rescuing Judah, would utterly wipe out Judah. For Ahaz, the sign of Immanuel was a sign of judgment because he saw the sign as an inconvenience, and what a sign means depends on how you see it.

Fast forward 700 years to the fulfillment of this sign. Like Ahaz, Joseph and Mary lived in a time of political fear and doubt. They lived in an occupied country. Judea was under Roman rule. Their lives were filled with fear and doubt, too. Mary was found to be pregnant, after the time she was betrothed yet before the time the marriage consummated. For Mary, this meant shame, rejection, and possible death by stoning for adultery. For Joseph, this meant embarrassment and shame. He intended to divorce Mary quietly and send her away.

But, as in the case of Ahaz, in the midst of this trouble, the Lord sent an angel to Joseph to reach out with help and hope. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said. "Do not fear to take Mary as

your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you will call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

The Lord gave to Joseph the sign given to Ahaz, now fulfilled. “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel.’ (which means, God with us). Joseph saw this sign of the virgin birth as a reassurance, not only of Mary’s virtue, but also of God’s great plan coming to fruition. Therefore, rather than divorcing her and sending her away, Joseph took Mary as his wife and brought her into his home. For Joseph and Mary, the sign of Immanuel was a sign of blessing – forgiveness and salvation now coming, because what the sign means depends on how you see it.

What does the sign of Immanuel mean for you? We, like Ahaz and like Mary and Joseph, live in a time of fear and doubt. We are involved in one war and supposedly done with another war, ironically in the same location where ancient Assyria stood. Our economy is in shambles. People fear for their jobs, their health care, and their retirement funds. Our nation is sinking in debt. People fear for the future. Yet, instead of fearing, loving, and trusting in God above all things, people cling to the false gods and idols of this world – their own determined efforts, their bank accounts and investments, or the political process – in order to have hope for the future. Yet these idols never seem to be enough. They fail or fall short.

Like Ahaz and Joseph before us, God reaches out to us with help and hope. He seeks to relieve us of our fear. He desires to save us from our sins and the death and hell which these sins have earned for us. His intent for us is that we might live forever at His side in heaven. Like Ahaz and Joseph, the Lord gives us the sign of Immanuel. However, instead of reaching out to us with a prophet (as in the case of Ahaz) or an angel (as in the case of Joseph), He comes to us Himself, in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is indeed God in human flesh – Immanuel: God with us. By being truly human, Jesus could substitute for us and take our place before God. He could perfectly obey the Law of God

which God required of us. And He did just that. The Scriptures say, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.” (Heb. 4:15)

He could also stand before God’s wrath against humanity. And He did that, too. He suffered, not just part, but all of God’s punishment for sin. He went to a cross where He suffered both physically and spiritually, including being separated from God, before dying the death of a sinner.

By being truly divine – God in flesh – these actions of Jesus become more than example, more than showing off. They became effective for us and all humanity. Jesus’ perfect obedience is done for us. His holiness is credited to us. Jesus’ suffering and death is done for us. His sacrifice becomes the sacrifice which takes away our sin. Jesus’ resurrection from the dead is done for us. His new life is given to us in our baptism – a life which begins from that very moment when water was applied to you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit and lasts forever.

The sign of Immanuel – God with us – is not simply something begun at Christmas and reaches its pinnacle at Easter. Immanuel – God with us – occurs right now. It is not just some sort of spiritual presence. As God came to us in the flesh at His incarnation, God comes to us in His flesh and blood in Holy Communion where He delivers to us what that flesh and blood won for us by His perfect life, sacrificial death, and victorious resurrection, namely, forgiveness, life, and hope.

So, how do YOU see the sign of Immanuel? If you see it like Ahaz – something unreal and an inconvenience to your plans for life, then it is a sign of judgment and punishment which Jesus will bring to you when He comes again visibly on the last day. If you see it like Mary and Joseph – something very real which gives you true life, then it is a sign of forgiveness and hope which Jesus will fulfill for you when He comes again visibly on the last day. It’s one and the same sign. What the sign means depends on how you see it! Amen.