

The Promise of a Bright Future

Advent 4A

Text: Isaiah 7:10–16

December 23, 2007

The Promise of a Sign

During Advent, we hear the good news that
God promises us a *Bright Future* in his Kingdom...
a future where we experience a world of peace and well-being.

- The 1st Sunday in Advent, we heard the promise of peace.
The word of God spoken by Isaiah
assures us that there will be a day
when God's Kingdom will come
and his peace will reign
over all the earth.

On that day people shall
beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks;
and nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

Isaiah 2:4

- The 2nd Sunday in Advent, we heard the promise of a Messiah.
We are assured that God will send
an anointed one,
who will be the means by which the world is transformed
from a wasteland of hostility
into a kingdom of peace.

Isaiah tells us,
A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse...and
The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid...

Isaiah 11:1 & 6

- The 3rd Sunday in Advent, we heard the promise
that when God's Kingdom
comes in its fullness
it will bring wholeness and well-being
to the world
and to our lives.

We hear from Isaiah
the desert shall rejoice and blossom...
and the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

Isaiah 35:1 & 5

Today, we hear the fourth promise of Advent—
 the promise that God will give us a sign to assure us that
 the promise is being fulfilled before our eyes.

In the reading from Isaiah,
 we hear the conversation between the prophet and King Ahaz
 where Isaiah encourages the king to trust in the promise of God.
 The scene between Isaiah and Ahaz
 would be funny if it wasn't
 so typical...and sad.

Ahaz has a major problem on his hands.
 Israel, the northern kingdom of the 12 tribes of Israel,
 has entered into a military coalition with the Arameans
 which threatens the security of Judah, the southern kingdom.
 That coalition pits Hebrew against Hebrew, brother against brother—
 somewhat akin to the Civil War
 that tore apart our nation 150 years ago.

Ahaz is scurrying like crazy to forge an alliance with the Assyrians
 to stave off the threat this Israelite-Aramean alliance
 poses to his kingdom.

As the frantic king tries to seal the deal,
 Isaiah encourages him to trust in God,
 not in political alliances.

When Ahaz rejects Isaiah's admonition
 and stubbornly pushes ahead with his plan,
 the prophet says,
Ask God for a sign if you don't believe me.
 Good Hebrew that he is,
 Ahaz is not about to *put the LORD to the test.*

I will not put the LORD to the test.

That's an honorable thing to say when it is rooted in faith.

But these words of Ahaz are not a declaration of faith;
they are a diversionary tactic to cover up his doubt.

Ahaz will not ask for a sign because his faith in God is too small
to believe that God is big enough and mighty enough
to bring about the peace that will put an end to his peril.

When Isaiah hears enough of the king's false piety,
he says in essence,

OK buster, the LORD himself will give you a sign.

*Look, the young woman is with child
and shall bear a son,
and shall name him Immanuel.*

Such a common sight, isn't it—

a young woman with a baby in her arms!

We see that sight all the time.

Yes, Matthew uses this text to point to Jesus as the anointed Son of God—
cue the recitative *Behold a Virgin Shall Conceive*
from Handel's oratorio *The Messiah*—

but Isaiah is not talking about a supernatural or cosmic event.

He is talking about the every day wonder of life itself—
the birth of a little child.

But that has staggering implications for our lives

if we stop to think about it.

God gives us great promises—

- the promise of a peaceable kingdom...
and a messiah to bring that kingdom
to our lives...
- the promise that this kingdom will bring
wholeness and well-being to our lives
creating life anew within us—
- and the promise that God gives us signs all over the place
encouraging us to trust
the promises that are given.

But while the promises are great,
 the windows through which
 we see them being fulfilled
 are often small and ordinary events
 that are all too easily
 overlooked or missed.

If we do not believe the promises of God,
 it is not because God is too weak or too small
 to fulfill the promise that he has made;
 it is because our faith is not big enough
 to trust in the God who shows
 his power and might at work in the world
 in small and unpretentious ways over and over again.

Just like Ahaz,
 you and I try so hard to do everything on our own.
 We think we are responsible
 for everything that happens.
 We think that for God's kingdom to come,
 we have to do something
 to make it happen.

We don't—we can't!
 Only God can bring in the kingdom—
 only God can give us true peace—
 peace that calms and sustains us even in the eye of the storm—
 only God can deliver us
 into his kingdom of grace.

When the Hebrew people were caught between
 Pharaoh's army and the deep blue sea,
 they panicked thinking their death was at hand.

Moses said to the people,
*Do not be afraid, stand firm,
 and see the deliverance that
 the Lord will accomplish for you today...
 The Lord will fight for you,
 and you have only to keep still.*

A short time later,
the people watch as Moses
stretches out his hand over the sea,
and the Lord drives back the waters of the sea
and the Israelites go into the sea
on dry ground

During Advent, we hear the promise of God
that the day is coming when his anointed Messiah
will establish his kingdom of peace in the world.

Do we or do we not trust God
to deliver us into his kingdom
and give us peace!

The signs are everywhere.

Do we have the eyes of faith to see them?

Do we have the depth of faith to trust the promise?