

**4 Advent – Year A – December 22, 2010 - Homily**  
**Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80: 1-7, 16-18; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25**  
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“Trust God where you cannot trace Him. Do not try to penetrate the cloud He brings over you; rather look to the bow that is on it. The mystery is God’s; the promise is yours,” so wrote Presbyterian Minister, John MacDuff. Tonight’s reading from Isaiah has a huge element of trust for us to explore as we unfold the mystery of Ahaz’s refusal to accept God’s sign, and the mystery of the sign himself, named Immanuel, God with us.

Let’s begin with King Ahaz, who is desperately afraid. At this period in history, Judah and Israel are divided kingdoms. Ahaz is king of Judah, and is basically in hiding in Jerusalem, under threat from two kings, the king of Israel and the king of Aram, also known as Ephraim. These two hostile kings are attempting to invade Jerusalem and replace Ahaz with a puppet leader who will join forces with them against the Assyrians. Yahweh has sent the prophet Isaiah to assure Ahaz and Judah of God’s divine protection, and the promise that there will always be a king of the Davidic line on the throne in Jerusalem. However, Ahaz hides behind false piety and refuses to ask for a sign from God. Sadly, Ahaz has not been faithful to God’s commandments. He worships pagan gods, and even sacrifices his own son, before entering into his own alliance with Assyria. As history will show some twenty years later, this alliance will result in the destruction of Jerusalem by the Assyrians. By refusing God’s proffered gift of a sign – as big or as small as he might ask – Ahaz is simply showing his true colors. He really has no faith or trust in God.

Enter the prophet Isaiah, sent by God to prove God’s faithfulness, and God’s steadfast love. When God sends a child as a sign, it was not unusual for the child concerned to be named with a symbolic name, describing their identity and destiny. As did the prophet Hosea, Isaiah has several such children, and it is proposed amongst Biblical scholars that the child in this prophecy is Isaiah’s own son, about to be born to a young woman, Isaiah’s wife no less, present in Ahaz’s court. Later in the book of Isaiah, we discover that Isaiah’s wife is also a prophetess. The birth of children is always a gift from God, but particularly so in troubled times when food was frequently scarce due to war, or when major or strategic cities were experiencing a siege. Think about, with the status of women being almost as low as that of children, guess who got fed when food was in short supply? You got it! The leaders, the soldiers, and the other men were a much higher priority than the women and children. Consequently, in times of war women frequently miscarried or were unable to become pregnant due to severe weight loss and famine. This child, sent by God as a sign, is to be named Immanuel, God with us. The sign is understood as God’s gracious act bringing about that which is prophesied. Not only is this a clear sign and message to the people of Judah of God’s protection against their immediate enemies, but there are some interesting references to the child and food. In order for the child to be weaned onto curds and honey it is a sure sign of a major reversal in Judah’s fortunes. A time of great prosperity is about to ensue, and God is the author, the One to whom thanksgiving is due. Isaiah extends the prophecy to make sure that Ahaz understands completely: God is promising that the kings of Israel and Ephraim will be defeated completely, and their lands deserted.

As we heard on Sunday, Matthew takes the prophecy of Isaiah and applies it to the birth of Mary's child, Jesus. What we have to understand is that all the prophetic words of the Hebrew Scriptures had clear and present meaning in their own context and their own eras. Yet even Jesus speaks of how the Hebrew Scriptures prophesied about His coming, His life, His ministry, and even His death and resurrection. So we have to honor the current context of each prophecy, even as we, like Matthew, rejoice in the broader context of God's work in the sweeping history of salvation. Many prophetic words have echoes that extend and repeat across time, with resonances that ring true in new ages. As is always true of Scripture, we read it, hear it, experience it, and embrace it anew in each generation. The Word of the Lord has truths to teach us beyond time, and into eternity.

For you and I today, there is still truth in Isaiah's words to Ahaz, and Ahaz's response to God and to Isaiah. God's ways are ultimately mysterious, even when we have the assurance of God's constant presence. The challenge this reading poses for us, is that we each ask ourselves what sign of God's faithfulness have we experienced this week in our lives? Where have we seen or heard about God's work in the world, or the in-breaking of God's kingdom in this community? If we have encountered the living God at any point in our lives, did we too refuse the sign like Ahaz? In other words, did we betray our own lack of trust in God's promises and God's faithfulness in the midst of the stuff of life? When we are overshadowed by the cloud of God's presence, do we see the rainbow and remember the covenant promise, or do we try and find our own way out of the cloud? It's important that we reflect on these mysteries and our own experiences with the living God, especially as we prepare for the coming of our Lord Jesus. If not, Advent and Christmas are nothing more than a series of celebrations orchestrated by culture, and directed by a break from work, and visits with family and friends. In essence, these are celebrations are centered on ourselves. As important as our family and friends are, the purpose of the Advent season is to prepare our hearts to celebrate the coming of our Lord Jesus, and the revelation of God's gift of salvation. To reiterate probably the biggest clichés of the year, we really do need to "remember the reason for the season", and "keep Christ in Christmas". But more than all of this, just like Mary and Joseph, just like Isaiah, you and I simply need to trust God, and remain faithful to the Good News of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. The mystery will always be God's, but the promise is ours to hold on to, to live in to, and to share.

Amen.