

Today I'll be reading Isaiah 7:1-17 from the Message. While this seems a long passage to get to the essential nugget – it really helps to get the context.

So, let's read.

During the time that Ahaz son of Jotham, son of Uzziah, was king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah son of Remaliah of Israel attacked Jerusalem, but the attack sputtered out.

When the Davidic government learned that Aram had joined forces with Ephraim (that is, Israel), Ahaz and his people were badly shaken. They shook like trees in the wind.

Then God told Isaiah, "Go and meet Ahaz. Take your son Shear-jashub (A-Remnant-Will-Return) with you. Meet him south of the city at the end of the aqueduct where it empties into the upper pool on the road to the public laundry.

Tell him, Listen, calm down. Don't be afraid. And don't panic over these two burnt-out cases, Rezin of Aram and the son of Remaliah. They talk big but there's nothing to them.

Aram, along with Ephraim's son of Remaliah, have plotted to do you harm. They've conspired against you, saying,

'Let's go to war against Judah, dismember it, take it for ourselves, and set the son of Tabeel up as a puppet king over it.'

But God, the Master, says,

"It won't happen. Nothing will come of it

Because the capital of Aram is Damascus and the king of Damascus is a mere man, Rezin.

As for Ephraim, in sixty-five years it will be rubble, nothing left of it. The capital of Ephraim is Samaria, and the king of Samaria is the mere son of Remaliah.

If you don't take your stand in faith, you won't have a leg to stand on."

YHWH spoke again to Ahaz. This time he said, "Ask for a sign from your YHWH. Ask anything. Be extravagant. Ask for the moon!"

But Ahaz said, "I'd never do that. I'd never make demands like that on YHWH!"

So Isaiah told him, "Then listen to this, government of David! It's bad enough that you make people tired with your pious, timid hypocrisies, but now you're making YHWH tired.

So the Lord is going to give you a sign anyway. Watch for this: A virgin will get pregnant. She'll bear a son and name him Immanuel (God-With-Us).

By the time the child is twelve years old, and able to make moral decisions, the threat of war will be over. Relax, those two kings that have you so worried will be out of the picture.

But also be warned: YHWH will bring on you and your people and your government a judgment worse than anything since the time the kingdom split, when Ephraim left Judah. The king of Assyria is coming!"

Standing at just the right place on a clear day at the Grand Canyon in Arizona you can look west or east or north and be stunned and overwhelmed by the enormity of this great land feature. You can see for miles and miles in each direction and all you could see is rocks. Or all you could see is the shadows of the clouds playing on the rock, the fascinating colour changes in the stratifications, the path winding down and down and down and then up and up and up. If you're lucky you can catch a glimpse of the Colorado River – but that isn't as it used to be. The dam holding back the river is far far upstream.

My first glimpse of the Grand Canyon was unbelievable – well, so was my second and third and fourth glimpse. What's so striking about the canyon is that there's no real lead-up to it. You are in some trees, there's a pile of people walking over there – you follow them and you turn a corner and then BAM. It takes your breath away. Every time. I heard myself, sometimes, say an involuntary “oh”.

Some people take the Grand Canyon for granted – It's just a big hole. Ya, it's a hole – but it's a spectacular hole. Perspective always runs amok when we look at it – the rocks on the other side are bigger than we think they are – and farther away than we think they are.

The Grand Canyon can be a great big hole or it could stand like a prophetic statement of God's grandeur and power.

Standing at just the right place on a clear day in Jerusalem, the prophet Isaiah could see for miles and miles and years and years. In the distance he was struck by the Majesty of the Grand God of Israel, and this vision was expressed in the form of a sign. “Behold,” he told King Ahaz, “a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.”

Standing at just the right place on a clear night in Nazareth, engaged to marry an obviously pregnant Mary, Joseph could see for miles and miles and years and years. In a dream, he saw an angel of the Grand God of Israel, and this dream persuaded him not to quietly put aside his wife-to-be for obvious infidelity. The words of this dream harkened back to the days of Isaiah. “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.”

From his vantage point, Isaiah looked out and saw the grandeur of the Lord, and by this sight he directed King Ahaz to see God at work in the very near future. And God was indeed at work at that point in time. But distances can be deceiving.

The angel of the Lord spoke the same words to Joseph in a dream hundreds of years later. And yet, those words were not ancient and outdated. In fact those words were hundreds of years closer to the time of their fulfilment. The young woman Mary, a virgin, had obviously already conceived and would soon bear a child.

Standing at just the right place on a clear day in Menno, Washington, we look back to that birth in Bethlehem, and hear in those words of Isaiah, the saving work of the great and Grand LORD.

“Behold, a young woman, a virgin, shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall call his name Immanuel.”

Now, Ahaz was a basically good King; that is, he was a decent politician. Of course, the historians of the Bible don't have many kind words for him. 2 Kings, 16 summarizes his reign by saying, Ahaz “did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord his God.” Ahaz probably would've written a different epitaph, calling himself a “political realist.”

You see, the kings of Aram (which is Syria) and Israel (Judah's cousins to the north) joined forces and were trying to persuade Ahaz to join them and together they would make a coalition against the super-power, Assyria. Ahaz refused and so Aram and Israel invaded and besieged Jerusalem.

Besieged by his not-so-friendly neighbors, Ahaz considered it a politically savvy thing-to-do to sneakily call the big kid on the block over to his side to help. This bully – namely Emperor Tiglath-Pileser III from Assyria and his army came over, indeed, and beat up Ahaz' troublesome neighbors, thus solving the problem. Syria was destroyed and two years later – from 732-722, the Assyrians came and captured the upper class people of Galilee and Samaria – the lost 10 tribes of Israel– leaving the poor, widowed and orphans.<sup>1</sup>

Now, Ahaz would have called it political realism. Nevertheless, Judah was forced to make tribute payments to Assyria for years to come.

The prophet Isaiah, standing where he did, able to see Yahweh's ultimate plan in the distance, considered such realism to be not only naive, but also dangerous and a bit faithless.

Could God be depended upon? "Ask Yahweh for a huge sign and see," says Isaiah. But political realist Ahaz already had his mind made up. "I will not put the Lord to the test,...I'm just going to do my own thing" answers Ahaz.

But Isaiah sees through this "praise the Lord" exterior to the "I'll do as I please. Thank you very much." interior. And so, Isaiah gives Ahaz a sign from Yahweh ...whether the King asked for it or not.

"O my people, are you still waiting for the Warrior God – and now you are terrified that the gods of Syria are greater than I AM? Must I be like you, only bigger? Must I be vengeful in a world obsessed with getting even? I Am will give you a sign: "Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall name him, Immanuel."

The way Isaiah phrased these words, they sounded like a threat to Ahaz. To name a child "God with us" as opposed to Assyria is with us - is act of faith when neighboring kings and their armies are threatening to break into your stronghold and pillage and plunder.

While King Ahaz's solution was to call in the bully, Isaiah's word was to instead trust in the God of Israel. "If you choose the bully over God," Isaiah said, "the bully will eventually do to you that which you want him to do to others." Saying "God is with us," and then blatantly trusting in your own might will only make you look foolish when your might will not save you.

A threat, indeed.

However, woven into that prophecy of Isaiah to Ahaz was a thread of hope. Ahaz was left with words he could either take as a threat or as a promise. Being who he was, a political realist, he opted to see it as a

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<sup>1</sup> Ludlow, Victor L. "Historical Background of the Time of Isaiah." Brigham Young University , 1982.  
(taken from Victor L. Ludlow's book entitled Prophet, Seer, and Poet (1982), pp.19-25)  
<https://emp.byui.edu/SatterfieldB/Rel%20404/Historical%20Background%20of%20Time%20of%20Isaiah%20Ludlow.pdf>

toothless threat. However, history records that this threat did have teeth. It came to pass. The big kid on the block did come and handle Ahaz's immediate problems...and then stayed to begin the end of Judah.

God with us was ignored.

Joseph was basically a good man - that is, he was honest and compassionate. As the story is told in Matthew's gospel, when Joseph discovered his wife-to-be was pregnant with someone else's child, he felt he could not follow through and marry this woman. It wouldn't be right. On the other hand, however, he felt he could not end their relationship in a way that would damage her reputation. That wouldn't be right, either. A quiet annulment before a few friendly witnesses rather than an out-in-the-open court procedure - this was his decision: honest and compassionate.

A dream in the quiet of the night changed his mind. In it, an angel spoke words of promise, that Mary was not pregnant due to some affair with another guy. She, instead, was chosen by God for an altogether different kind of purpose to save God's people. Mary would give birth to a child who would accomplish this.

The details of the dream were rather sketchy, but there was a connection with another clear moment, centuries earlier, when the prophet Isaiah foresaw a child to be named Immanuel, God with us. The angel invited Joseph to take the risk and join in that dangerous adventure, to go with God.

Was this dream for real? If so, could God be depended upon? Face it, Joseph was but a carpenter. What did he know of such things? Why Mary, and not some other Ruth or Esther? The first years of marriage are stressful enough without something like this hanging over it...

These, and many more, are thoughts and questions we bring to the text. Nothing is said of Joseph's ponderings after the dream. In fact, scripture never records a single word Joseph ever uttered. It merely says that with his actions, Joseph responded with a "yes." He took Mary as his wife and raised the child as his own.

"Behold, a young woman, a virgin, shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall call his name Immanuel." How differently Ahaz and Joseph responded to the same words of the prophet. Ahaz chose to see a threat within Isaiah's words. Joseph, instead, chose to see a hopeful promise. Ahaz ignored it to his own peril and, indeed, a threat came true for Jerusalem.

Joseph stepped into it, and a promise came true for God's people. Immanuel: God with us.

God being with us can be seen as a threat or a promise.

The wonder of Christmas is that God chose to come to us in the least threatening way possible: as a child - a vulnerable child, born into a family of few means, born in a cattle shed, amid the fodder and manure. How could such a child be a threat to anyone? Under those circumstances he had only a 50/50 chance of reaching his first birthday.

God came as a vulnerable child. Hardly a threat. And yet, King Herod, another political realist, tried his hardest to have this child killed.

At Christmas we celebrate God coming as a vulnerable child, but I sometimes wonder if we, ourselves, don't also find him a bit of a threat. Why else would we pile onto this season all the things that we do? Do we allow this birth to transform us?

If the God of Israel would take the route of vulnerability and come to us in such a non-threatening way, would such an act of God lead us to respond in the same manner? I wonder.

Isn't it the promise of Immanuel, God with us, to help us approach God without pretense, admitting our weakness and allowing God to use our weakness as strength?

Isn't it the promise of Immanuel, God with us, to approach each other without pretense, admitting our weakness and allowing God to use our weakness as a strength?

Such a promise *can* be threatening! It's much easier to put up a nativity scene which passersby can enjoy, than it is to act out this "God with us" promise of Christmas in our lives.

The possibilities of the promise of God with us are awesome. What makes Immanuel, God with us, a threat, however, is the simple question of "are we with God? Are we willing to put our whole trust in with God – even if the prospects sound ridiculous or too risky?"

That's all Joseph did.

Ahaz didn't. Instead of trusting in God, he trusted in his own might – and the whole nation suffered.

"Behold, a young woman, a virgin, shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall call his name Immanuel, God with us."

We stand at just the right place on this Sunday before Christmas to see the great vista of Christ's birth – Immanuel God with us. We can respond to it as a threat or a promise. Which will you see?