

## The Fourth Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 7:10-16  
Romans 1:1-7  
Matthew 1:18-25

Suppose that you are a news photographer. Late one night you are called to downtown Houston because one of the tallest buildings there is on fire. As soon as you arrive, you realize you have a problem. How do you capture the full picture on film? If you stand close, you can't get the whole building in your lens. But if you move back far enough to get the full picture, you will be so distant that the building will look like a toy skyscraper. Then suddenly it dawns on you. In order to capture the full scope of the event, you don't take pictures of the building that is burning. Instead you photograph the faces of the people who are watching in awe and disbelief. The event itself defies direct portrayal, but in the faces of the onlookers you can see the full significance of what is happening.

The power of God is infinitely more awesome than a tall building wrapped in flames. It is futile to seek to portray the power of God in and of itself. Instead you turn to those who have personally witnessed that power. By portraying their experience, you capture a reflection of the awesome power of God.

In the three lessons for today, the Fourth Sunday in Advent, we have portraits of people who were direct witnesses of God's power—Ahaz, Paul, and Joseph. All three of them were headstrong and stubborn. And all three of them faced the challenge of a God who was even stronger and more persistent than they.

Ahaz was the king of the Southern Kingdom during the eighth century before Jesus. The Southern Kingdom was being pressured by the kingdoms north of it to join in a common political and military alliance against the nation Assyria that was threatening invasion from the east. King Ahaz couldn't make up his mind whether to join the alliance or not. The prophet Isaiah tried to advise him, but Ahaz refused to make a decision. Finally, Isaiah challenged Ahaz to ask for a direct sign from God regarding what he should do. But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test."

At this point Isaiah (and presumably God as well) lost patience with Ahaz. "The Lord himself will give you a sign," Isaiah said. "Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he

knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.”

Often these words of Isaiah are interpreted as a prediction of Jesus’ birth, but they are nothing of the sort. Isaiah is speaking only of the passing of chronological time. In the length of time it takes for a pregnant woman to bear a son and for the lad to become old enough to know the difference between right and wrong, both kingdoms to the north will have fallen. The child will not be starving because of warfare, but instead he will be eating curds and honey, the food of abundance and of peace. In other words, Isaiah is telling Ahaz not to enter an alliance with the northern kingdoms, because invasion by the Assyrian army is inevitable and those nations will be soundly defeated. On the other hand, the Southern Kingdom may be spared by Assyria when it sees that the Southern Kingdom is not an ally of the northern kingdoms.

As it turned out, Isaiah was right. In 722 B.C. Assyria vanquished the northern kingdoms, but it spared the Southern Kingdom. In fact, the Southern Kingdom continued to exist for nearly 150 years.

Ahaz was a stubborn man, puzzled over the decision he faced but headstrong against having anybody else tell him what to do. Ahaz would not ask for a sign from God. So God gave him one anyway. He put into Isaiah’s mouth the word of prophecy in which Isaiah offered the illustration of a child’s birth and childhood to show how quickly the geopolitical situation would change. Ahaz, the great and powerful king of the Southern Kingdom, was overshadowed by the even greater and more powerful God of all the nations.

The second lesson is from the first chapter of Paul’s letter to the church in Rome. He begins, “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God...” Remember, Paul was not always a servant of Jesus Christ or an ally of God. His birth name was Saul. Soon after Pentecost, Stephen was stoned to death for preaching the Gospel, and Saul was standing nearby approving the execution. Saul continued to track down Christians and oversee their martyrdom until one day on the way to Damascus he was struck blind by God. Several days later he regained his sight. He also gained insight into the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And when he became a Christian, he changed his name from Saul to Paul.

At first Paul was the sort of man any reasonable person would give up on. He was a clever Pharisee, eloquent in his arguments against the Christian faith and zealous in his persecution of Christians. He was a stubborn man, headstrong in every way. But God overpowered him that day on the road to Damascus. God transformed the worst enemy of Christ into one of the strongest allies the church has ever known.

Today's Gospel tells the story of Joseph, the father of Jesus. Joseph was a self-directed man of great integrity. From the narrative we get a picture of Joseph as a man who was headstrong as well. He was engaged to Mary, "but before they lived together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit." Notice the phrase "was found." It wasn't just that she was pregnant. Her pregnancy was beginning to show, apparently. It was beginning to be "found out."

Joseph was a righteous man, but he was unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace. Also, Joseph wasn't all that willing to expose himself to public disgrace either. So he planned to dismiss her quietly, that is, call off the entire engagement and marriage. But no sooner had he made that decision than God appeared to him in a dream and told him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife; the child in her womb was the Son of God, conceived from the Holy Spirit. When Joseph awoke, he did as God had commanded him. He took Mary as his wife, but he had no marital relations with her until she had given birth to Jesus.

Joseph was a headstrong man who had made a firm decision about how to handle the unexpected pregnancy of his fiancée. But God overpowered him at precisely that point where he was most resolute about his decision. As a result Joseph turned and reversed that decision.

What we have here are not merely three stories about people who changed their minds. We have three portraits of the power of God. We have three pictures of people in whose faces and personalities we can see a clear reflection of the power of God to transform people and alter the course of history. In the story of Ahaz we see God's insistence on giving the Southern Kingdom another chance to be faithful. In the story of Paul we see the adroitness of God in making the worst enemy of the Gospel one of its greatest advocates. And in the story of Joseph we see the power of God to cause a righteous man to flaunt the rules of social propriety in order to foster the birth and childhood of the Son of God.

Matthew quotes Isaiah to support calling Jesus Emmanuel. Matthew's point is worthwhile, even if his quoting is actually *misquoting*. Luther once said that Matthew's misuse of Isaiah in this passage was "furchtbar aber fruchtbar," frightful but fruitful. The Hebrew word Emmanuel means "God-with-us." But Emmanuel is not Jesus' name. Emmanuel is Jesus' vocation. In Ahaz, Paul, and Joseph we see reflections of the power of God, but it is in Jesus that we see not merely a reflection but the very embodiment of God.

When a baby is born, I want to see it, of course, but I also look at the parents as they show me their child. In their faces I see a reflection not only of the child, but of the grace of God who gave them their child. So also when a child is baptized, I watch the face of its mother and father, even as I watch the face of the child. For in the faces of all these people is reflected none other than the face of God. Created, redeemed, and sanctified by God, the child glows with grace even if it cries and squirms at the moment of baptism. I believe that the activity of a child's body and vocal cords can reflect God just as surely as can passive slumber. No matter how the child behaves during baptism, the grace of God is still there in all fullness.

The church throughout the centuries has been composed of stubborn, headstrong people. Christ the King Lutheran Church is no exception. I wouldn't expect it to be, nor would I want it to be. What makes the church the church, however, is not the strength of its members but the strength and power of God to transform the members into persons with ever greater faithfulness and more productive service in the world. What makes the church the church is that the Word of God is able to become flesh in the life and work of the people. What makes the church the church is the power, grace, mercy, and love reflected in the faces of all the members who have beheld and continue to behold the glory of God in Jesus Christ.

Originally preached in 1995