

Fear, Trust, and Immanuel
Isaiah 7 – 8

Turn to Isaiah 7. Isaiah 7 – 8 answers this question: What’s the danger of fear? We are afraid because we see or feel danger. Danger causes fear, as it should. When we’re on the top of a long ladder we get nervous, as we should. But being afraid causes another danger. Fear itself can get us into trouble. Thus the question today: what’s the real danger of fear.

This is the first Sunday of Advent. The Christian year Scriptures follow a three year cycle, using in turn Matthew, then Mark, then Luke, then back to Matthew. 2022 is the first year of the cycle, so this year Advent teaching will use mostly Matthew.

Matthew 1 quotes from Isaiah 7, when Matthew says the virgin will conceive and bear a child, and will call him “Immanuel.” And Isaiah 7 has an important story built around the son named Immanuel. It’s a story about fear and the danger of fear.

Why Ahaz and his People were Afraid (Isa 7:1-2)

This story is about three small nations, and one huge superpower. Israel is divided into two countries at this time, Judah in the south, whose kings were descendants of David, and Israel in the north, made up of the ten northern tribes. Ephraim is a nickname for Israel. Ahaz was the king of Judah, descendant of David, and this story is about Ahaz.

The three small nations in our story are Judah, Israel (the northern ten tribes), and Aram, another nation about the same size just north of Israel. Israel and Aram got together to attack Judah. That’s in Isa 7:1. They attacked, and they did a lot of damage, took home a lot of plunder, but they could not overpower Jerusalem, so they went back home.

A couple of years later, Ahaz and all of Judah heard that Israel and Aram were planning to do this again. They would join armies again and attack Judah and Jerusalem again. It was very bad last time Israel and Aram attacked, and it was close. Ahaz and all his people were terrified. They shook with fear as trees shake in the wind.

Notice that in verse 2, Ahaz is called “house of David.” Isaiah calls him that because the line of David kings is at a turning point here. Once in a while we make a choice that has huge implications. It affects people’s lives for a long time. We don’t know at the time it will be such an important choice, but afterward it becomes clear. Ahaz was at a crucial point like that. The future of the David kings was on the line in what Ahaz chose to do with his fear.

And just to be clear, Ahaz did not even pretend to follow God. 2 Kgs 16 and 2 Chr 28 tell this story too, and tell us that Ahaz was openly idolatrous, he had no interest in the true God, and he even sacrificed his son to some pagan god, the worst possible idolatry.

Isaiah's Message to Ahaz (Isa 7:4-9)

So God sent the prophet Isaiah to talk to Ahaz. Ahaz, the David king, and his people, are shaking with fear at the thought of Israel and Aram attacking them again. Verse 4-9 tell us what God told Isaiah to tell Ahaz. There are three crucial lines: v4, v7, and v9.

(v4) *Say to him, "Be careful to keep calm, and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart..."*

(v7) *This is what the Sovereign Lord says: "It will not take place, it will not happen."* God told Ahaz as bluntly as possible that those two nations, Israel and Aram, will not attack you. It won't happen, period. They are indeed planning and conspiring, but it will not happen, Ahaz, it will not take place.

(v9) *If you do not stand firm in your faith, Ahaz, you will not stand at all.* "It's very important, Ahaz, that you keep calm, don't be afraid, and don't lose heart. What you fear will not happen. If you fail at this, Ahaz, you will not stand at all. If you fail at this, you are done."

Isaiah leaves something out. 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles tell us clearly, and Isaiah's readers all knew it so he does not even mention it. The missing piece: Ahaz has a plan to save himself from these two conspiring nations. Here's his plan: he will take all the silver and gold from the temple and out of his palace and send it to the superpower, the Assyrians, and pay them to come and wipe out Israel and Aram. Then he won't have to worry about Israel and Aram. That's his plan.

And God knows that this is an awful plan. It's an awful plan for two reasons. One, Israel and Aram are not going to attack, you have nothing there to fear. God said that to Ahaz. The other reason, that God tells Isaiah, is that if the Assyrians come, they will take ten times what you send, they will rob and plunder you blind.

So through Isaiah, God says to Ahaz, *"Be careful to keep calm, don't be afraid, don't lose heart. What you fear will not happen, it will not take place. If you do not stand firm in your faith, Ahaz, you will not stand at all. Not trusting me on this will bring you disaster."*

The real danger of fear is what we do to save ourselves. If you are high on a ladder, and you're scared, come down, by all means climb down. That's the right use of fear. But fear of what other people might do can lead us to disobey what God has made clear, and that's the real danger: when we have to disobey God to save ourselves.

God is not insulted that we feel afraid. I don't like that feeling, I tell myself that if I trusted God more I would not feel afraid, which might be true. God was not insulted that Jesus dreaded crucifixion. But God is offended if I disobey him to save myself. If you obey God rather than save yourself, God calls that being bold and courageous, even though you might have been terrified the whole time. The challenge of fear is not how we feel, it's what we do.

God Offers a Sign (Isa 7:10-12)

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, “Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.” But Ahaz said, “I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test.”

Ahaz had not ever given God the time of day, yet God worked very hard to get him on the right path. Ahaz does not just need to take Isaiah’s word for it, that the attack will never happen. God will give him a sign, any sign he asks for, deepest depths or highest heights! What an offer! I’m not sure anyone else in the Bible ever got an offer from God like this.

Here’s why God is working so hard at this: if Ahaz goes ahead with his plan, and pays the Assyrians to come take care of him, the David kings will never get out of bondage to foreign kings. Ahaz failed in this test, he went ahead and paid the Assyrians to come, and from then on the David kings were servants to the superpower of the day.

They would rebel once in a while, and stop paying the huge tribute for a few years, but then the armies would come and beat them back into submission. That began with Ahaz, and that’s why God worked so hard to keep Ahaz out of this, even though Ahaz did not fear him.

Ahaz said, *“I will not ask the Lord for a sign, I will not put the Lord to the test.”* Putting God to the test works like this: “if you are really God, if you are really with me, then do this to prove it to me.” That makes God angry. Don’t do that to God. But God had invited Ahaz to ask for a sign. Ahaz used superficial obedience to mask his deep disobedience.

God Promises a Sign (Isa 7:13-17)

Then Isaiah said, “Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, for before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste. The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah—he will bring the king of Assyria.”

It's hard to understand who this son is in Isaiah. “Virgin” in Hebrew just meant a young single woman old enough to be married. In this paragraph, the readers would probably assume that a young woman would get married and have a child, and by the time this son was 3 or 4, Israel and Aram would be ruined, and so would Judah and Jerusalem. But the name means something.

Immanuel. God with us. When we make the wrong choice, does God leave? Abandon us? No, he’s still with his people. But what he does is make sure the other plan does not work. He’s too gracious to always do that, but that’s what he did in this story. God made sure it didn’t work.

The Two Sides of Immanuel – God with us (Isa 8:10)

*Devise your strategy, but it will be thwarted;
propose your plan, but it will not stand, for God is with us.*

This summarizes God's message to Ahaz and Judah. Ahaz's people are also terrified, and they want Ahaz to make a deal with the Assyrians. Ahaz is not doing this on his own, he has lots of support for this. These lines are what God thinks about our plans to save ourselves by disobeying him. When we make plans to save ourselves by disobeying God, here's his warning to us:

Devise your strategy, but it will be thwarted; propose your plan, but it will not stand, for God is with us. Will my sinful strategy fail because God has left me? No, it will fail because he's still with me, he's with me to make sure my wrong plan fails. I don't think he always does this, but it is a real warning.

On the other hand, there is good news underneath all this. Immanuel is still true. God is with us, and he does not leave us. When we stop ignoring him and turn to him, he responds very quickly, because he never really left. Even when we're badly out of line, he's still with us. That's not all bad, is it.

God's Strong Warning to the Faithful (Isa 8:11-13)

There was much fear in Judah at that time. Isaiah himself, and his family, and others who were still faithful to God, were all afraid of Israel and Aram attacking again. Everyone was afraid, just like now. So God gave an urgent warning directly to Isaiah the prophet, a warning about fear:

This is what the Lord says to me with his strong hand upon me, warning me not to follow the way of this people: "Do not call conspiracy everything this people calls a conspiracy; do not fear their fear, and do not dread it. But the Lord Almighty, make him your holy one. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread."

God says to Isaiah, don't be like this people. This people, Ahaz and Judah, think the conspiracy is Israel and Aram planning to attack again. These people think that's the real danger, Isaiah, and they dread it. But, says God, that's not the real danger. The real danger is acting like I don't exist, and ignoring my clear instructions.

When you are afraid, and when you feel dread, says God, think about me. Ignoring me is a much bigger problem than what Israel and Aram can do, especially when I've told you it will not happen, it will not take place.

People, we live in an anxious time. Fear is all around us. We are afraid of climate change, the planet too hot and stormy, we're afraid of war, and governments seem unstable and not managed well, we're afraid of what people will think of us, we're afraid of running out of money.

We are afraid of disease, and all kinds of nameless tragedies cram themselves into our heads, and the news reminds us about the ones we'd like to forget. If we leave the news alone, there's always a good friend to tell us about the bad things. We're afraid.

And God told Isaiah, don't you dare become one of those people. You just worry about me. When you feel fear, think about me. When you feel dread, think about me. Do not fear their fear and do not dread it. Make me, the Lord Almighty, your holy one.

The Faithful Respond (Isa 8:17)

Isaiah responded to this in 8:17. *I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the descendants of Jacob. I will put my trust in him.*

This is the right response, this is what God wanted, God warned Isaiah so this would happen. Isaiah does not decide to be terrified of God, or to dread God. He decides to trust in God, and wait for him to act.

This is the fear of the Lord. It means that when everyone else is running around scared and silly, and acts like the Lord Almighty is gone, the faithful will wait for the Lord, even when he seems to be hiding his face, the faithful put their trust in him, they are resolved to live as if God was with them. They refuse to be distracted from that by their fears and everyone else's fears. That's the fear of the Lord. Because no matter what happens, he is with us. Amen.

PRAYER

O God, save us from disobeying you to save ourselves. I have no idea how often we do this, probably often. Lord Almighty, lead us away from that. May our fears not turn us away from you, ever. May our fears always lead us to you. And God, you are offering something here. You're with us, no matter what, and we could be a lot less afraid. O God, help us not to fear their fear, or dread it. Again we ask, O God, may we not fear their fear, or dread it. May we always turn to you, and make you our Holy One. Make these Scriptures fruitful in our midst and in our minds. Amen.

BENEDICTION

May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and into Christ's perseverance. May the Lord of peace give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.