

Isaiah 7:10-17 (DHT)

Again YHWH spoke to Ahaz, “Ask a sign of YHWH your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, and I will not put YHWH to the test.” And he said, “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? Therefore, YHWH himself will give you a sign. Behold, the young woman is with child and about to give birth to a son. Let her name him Immanuel. He will eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted. YHWH will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father’s house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria.”

Illustration

What is in a name? Names can add a certain weight or significance to a person’s life or to situations within life. At the corporate office I work in, there is but one other male in a cubicle island full of women, half of whom are single moms, all of whom love to talk about their kids. They don’t just say, “My son did” this or that; instead, they say “My son Josh is proposing tonight.” When I was a wee lad and would misbehave, not only would I hear my name Daniel; but my mom would middle-name me—oh, that is when I really knew I was in trouble. Names add weight to circumstances, sometimes in good ways and sometimes in not so good ways.

Something else about names is that, you do not choose your name. At ten months old—with as much consciousness as a ten-month old can have—a young girl found herself being taken from an orphanage in Krasnodar, Russia and flown to the other side of the globe to be raised in a Christian home in America. Her birth mother had given her the Russian name Nadezhda, which simple means hope. I don’t know anything about this little girl’s birth mother. I don’t know if she chose that name on purpose or if it is a common Russian name. But I do know that a mother out there gave up her daughter named Hope to an orphanage where there was maybe a chance that that baby girl would get a better life than what she could give her. A mother who had lost all hope, gave up her daughter Hope, in the hope that Hope would have a better life. After naming this baby girl Rachel, my parents retained her birth name as my sister’s middle name—a constant reminder of the LORD’s provision to a couple who themselves had hoped for a baby girl.

You don't have a read much of the Hebrew Scriptures to know that names carry with them a weight or significance. These names are used in a variety of ways: some describe what ultimately becomes of that person's life, some describe the complete opposite of what becomes of that person's life, some describe how the parents viewed the LORD, and others describe something the LORD has determined to do.

Consider the following. Adam, the first man, translates into “man.” Abram means “father,” yet after the LORD established the Abrahamic covenant, promising he would be the father of many nations, Abram's name was changed to Abraham, which means “father of many.” Moses, the leader of the Israelites when they were delivered from Egypt—his name means “drawn out” or “delivered.” Elijah means “My God is YHWH.” Isaiah means “YHWH is salvation.” And Ezekiel means “God will strengthen.” That last part of Ezekiel comes from the Hebrew word *chazaq*, meaning “mighty” or “strength.” This same root-word appears in Hezekiah, the son of King Ahaz from our passage this morning—Hezekiah's name means “God is Mighty” or “Mighty God.” Now in being named “Mighty God,” no one suggests that Hezekiah himself was God, but rather his name pointed toward God, describing God as mighty. Names are important in the Hebrew Scriptures because sometimes they give us hints at what is about to happen in the lives of the name-holder or something the LORD has determined to do.

The Four Children

This morning, I want to show you the context of this famous Christmas passage, and introduce you to four children. The nation of Syria and the northern Kingdom had joined forces to go after Judah, the southern kingdom. Some of the LORD's own children are going to war against their own brothers from other tribes. When it was made known to King Ahaz that war and trouble were fast approaching, he shook in his boots, and subsequently, so did his people. How true it is that leaders often direct the trajectory of their people. The LORD instructs Isaiah to take his son *Shear-Jashub*, which means, “A Remnant Shall Return” to meet Ahaz at a specific location. Isaiah's son goes along with Isaiah to meet the incredibly fearful King Ahaz as a coalition of armies approaches. Isaiah 8:18 describes this child, and the other children we will soon meet, as signs that the LORD of Hosts is the one who dwells on Mount Zion, and the LORD of Hosts is the only God worthy of being consulted in times of trouble. Child #1, “A

Remnant Shall Return,” is a sign given specifically to Ahaz, that in this time of trouble, he needs to consult the LORD of Hosts alone for his salvation.

Syria and the northern kingdom’s mission is to conquer the southern kingdom and set their own king over it. To this mission, the LORD responds in 7:8-9 saying it will not happen and Judah’s attackers will be shattered within sixty-five years, and then the LORD issues a warning to Ahaz. This warning is *if you are not faithfully established, then you will not be established at all*. This phrase “faithfully established” has deep roots with the Davidic covenant, of which Ahaz is a direct beneficiary. Despite this, we read in 2 Kings 16 that Ahaz did not trust the LORD’s promise, and instead sought the help of another nation.

Isaiah tells Ahaz to ask for a sign from the LORD, *from the depths of Sheol to the heights of heaven*. But Ahaz refuses. Isaiah, rather angrily, rebukes him for testing the patience of the LORD. *Therefore, my Lord will give you a sign of His own accord! Look, the young woman is with child and about to give birth to a son. Let her name him Immanuel*. This is when we meet child #2, *Immanuel*, which means “God is with us.” Just like Child #1 was a sign specifically given to Ahaz, so also is Child #2. In Hebrew, “virgin” does not necessarily have a sexual connotation as it does in Greek or in modern English—it simply means a young woman. Sign #2 to Ahaz is that a young woman is pregnant, she is having a son, and that son is to be named “God is with us.” Isaiah is attempting to provide that divine perspective to Ahaz to diminish his fear over the war headed his way so he would trust in the LORD’s promise that the line of David has been faithfully established. Ahaz is not going to be the last Davidic king.

In the LORD’s response to the northern kingdom’s affront against their brothers, he said they would be shattered as a nation within sixty-five years. This cutting off would take place *by the time* this second child *Immanuel* learns to reject what is bad and choose what is good. This child lived in the days of Ahaz, and his name was a sign of the LORD’s continued presence with his people and continued covenant-faithfulness. The two kings Ahaz dreads will be abandoned—redemption from the LORD. Simultaneously though, the LORD will bring on Judah *such a time as has never been* since the two kingdoms split. Our passage this morning tells us this coming “time” is the King of Assyria, not to be mistaken with the kingdom of Syria. The Assyrian invasion was coming—judgment from the LORD. The LORD is the one bringing redemption; the LORD is the one bringing judgment.

Ahaz’s very power is rooted in the LORD’s promise to David, yet Ahaz regards the LORD’s help as worthless and Assyria’s help as worthy, so the LORD is going to use that “worthy helper” Assyria to eliminate the enemy, and bring judgment on Judah. All wrapped up in the sign of Child #2, *Immanuel*, is the LORD’s continued presence with his people through the line of David, the promise of judgment against the faithless, and the promise of redemption for the faithful. All three of these elements are wrapped up in this second sign to Ahaz through the child named *Immanuel*.

As we move into chapter eight and Isaiah describes the soon-coming Assyrian invasion, Scripture tells us Isaiah was intimate with the prophetess who conceived and gave birth to a son. At the instruction of the LORD, Isaiah named him *Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz*, which the LORD instructed him to write down before he was intimate with the prophetess, and Isaiah did so in the presence of named witnesses. This phrase he named his son means “Fast to the Plunder, Swift to the Spoil.” Why does this boy have such a name? Isaiah 8 tells us that before this boy learns to call out father or mother, the wealth and spoil of both Syria and Ephraim, the northern kingdom, will be carried off by Assyria. This judgment against the coalition of kingdoms attacking Judah is not far in the future but is imminent. Child #3 was a sign of the LORD’s promise to defeat both Syria and Ephraim, *and to do so soon*.

As I mentioned a few minutes ago, Isaiah 8:18 tells us these three children are sons of Isaiah, and their names, along with their father’s, are signs. These four names—“YHWH is salvation,” “A Remnant Shall Return,” “God is with us,” and “Fast to the Plunder, Swift to the Spoil”—are all signs specifically to Ahaz that the LORD will remain faithful to his covenant promise with David. Ahaz will break that covenant by relying on anything or anyone other than the LORD for salvation. These names do not describe the people themselves; instead, these names describe the LORD or things the LORD has determined to do.

But wait, there’s more! There is a final, fourth child in the context of this famous passage. When we move into chapter nine, we meet *Pele-Yoez-El-Gibbor-Aviyad-Sar-Shalom*—try fitting that in the yearbook! Most of our Bible translations have each part of that name stated on their own, but it would be more consistent and accurate to form these descriptions into one coherent thought. Therefore, a better translation is: *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called ‘A wonderful planner is the mighty God; the everlasting father is a commander of peace.’* Just like the others,

this Hebrew name describes something of God, not the child himself. And historically, this is a throne name. What do I mean by this? For example, Prince William and Duchess Kate from the United Kingdom have three children. Their eldest son, who is third in succession to the throne, is named George. But even though his name is George, his throne name is “His Royal Highness Prince George of Cambridge from the House of Windsor.” The name George is in there, but it also contains the majesty of the monarchy.

One of the Hebrew words in the throne name from Isaiah matches another name of significance—*El-Gibbor* or “Mighty God.” The king who followed Ahaz was Hezekiah, whose name means “Mighty God.” Ahaz was consulting the earthly army of Assyria instead of relying on the LORD’s covenant promise to David, and as a final sign to Ahaz, Isaiah tells him a child had *already* been born and the government will soon rest on his shoulders, his own son’s shoulders! A child has already been born—Hezekiah is already around when Isaiah is warning his father Ahaz about all this. This sign again refers to the continuation of the line of David beyond Ahaz—the LORD will remain faithful to his covenant, even as Ahaz unfaithfully relies on other means for salvation.

What about the Christmas Tradition?

Now that we have gotten through these four children, who were given as signs specifically to Ahaz, we can address the *Immanu-Elephant* in the room. The word *Immanuel* is used six times in the Hebrew Scriptures. Here in Isaiah 7 it is used as a name functioning as a sign from the LORD connected to the LORD’s covenant-faithfulness. Two more occurrences appear in Isaiah 8, both of which refer to the reason the nations’ plans will be thwarted—after all, it is ultimately the LORD’s plan that will succeed. In 1 Kings 8:57, Solomon encourages the people to worship the LORD who keeps his promises and is with them. And the final two occurrences appear in Psalm 46 and both describe the reason the nations’ plans will be thwarted.

If you are experiencing a tense, “is that true?” thought, it may be because the implication to how I have explicated this context is that Isaiah is not prophesying about a future messiah born of a sexual-virgin. You may be thinking, “But Matthew says Jesus is Immanuel, so sorry preacher, but you are wrong!” Yes, Matthew says Jesus is Immanuel, but we must be careful not to read the New Testament into the Hebrew Scriptures, unless it explicitly tells us to do so. Instead, let us use the Hebrew Scriptures, in this case Isaiah, as our lens through which we read

the New Testament, in this case Matthew. The sign of *Immanuel*, and the other children as well, is that God’s presence with his people will continue through the line of David, and the LORD will bring judgment against the faithless and redemption for the faithful.

Matthew’s Use of *Immanuel*

This brings us to the Gospel of Matthew. Turn with me to Matthew 1:18-24. *Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from his sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.*

A baby named Jesus somehow fulfills the sign of *Immanuel*. How could this be if the *Immanuel* child was an historical child from the days of Ahaz, a son of Isaiah? Because the name of the *Immanuel* child did not describe the child, but rather pointed to the covenant mission the LORD was determined to accomplish; Jesus fulfilled that mission. Nearly all scholars date the original writings of all four Gospel accounts no earlier than about fifteen years after Christ’s ascension. Nearly all scholars also agree Mark was the first to be written. That said, each Gospel account attempts to paint a different picture about Jesus, and Matthew spends a great deal emphasizing Jesus’ identity as the King. It should come as no surprise that the concept of the Kingdom of God is most developed in Matthew’s account. This is also why Matthew gives us a genealogy right at the beginning, to show that Jesus was a direct descendent of David. While writing his Gospel account in hindsight, attempting to portray Jesus as King, as he describes Jesus’ conception and birth, Matthew references Isaiah’s prophecy that we have considered this morning, declaring it fulfilled.

It is common belief that Jesus is the fulfillment of that passage because Mary was a virgin, but this is not the case—it is so much more than just that. Matthew’s comment about Isaianic fulfillment does not come in response to the angel’s declaration that Mary was sexually a virgin, even though she was; instead, it comes in response to what Jesus was to be named. Even though the genealogy says Joseph’s immediate father was Jacob, the angel calls Joseph the son of King David, a reminder of his royal lineage. The angel instructs Joseph to name his son Jesus, which means “YHWH saves,” *because he would save his people from their sins*. This is what fulfilled what Isaiah spoke of—the saving work of Jesus, not the virginity of Mary.

Matthew ascribed to Jesus the title of *Immanuel* because of the totality of Jesus’ work and life, not because of anything that Mary was or did. The totality of Jesus’ life, namely his death, resurrection, and ascension, brought an unrivaled judgment against the faithless, an unrivaled redemption for the faithful, and the inseparable continuation of the LORD’s presence with his people through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Jesus was the truest manifestation there could ever be of God being with his people through the continuation of the Davidic line.

After word began to spread about the resurrection of this Jesus-figure, Matthew wrote down his account of things. Looking back in hindsight, Matthew could see that what Jesus did on the cross was the most significant act of judgment there could ever be—eternal condemnation for all who refuse to trust the promise of the LORD. But what Jesus did on the cross was also the most significant act of redemption there could ever be—eternal life for those who do trust in the promise of the LORD. Why will the nations’ plans be thwarted? Because the LORD’s presence with us continues through our Messianic King from the line of David. Jesus, when he was on this earth, was God with us, and when he ascended into heaven, Jesus gave us the LORD’s presence through the Spirit’s indwelling in the temple of our bodies. Our King still reigns, and even this morning his presence is still with us.

Conclusion

And so, if I may ask a question: if judgment is given to the faithless and redemption is given to the faithful, then what is the covenant promise of the LORD in which we are to have faith? The covenant promise is that all who call on the name of Jesus as Lord, all who believe he was innocently crucified for their sins, and all who believe the Father raised him to life will also be raised to new life in the age to come, with a sin-debt of zero. They will receive a new heart,

which is a new worldview or value system. And they will be indwelt by the Holy Spirit here and now who guides us through life, convicting us of sin, preparing us, and sanctifying us until we enter the glory of our King to worship him and live with him for all eternity.

This is the covenant promise the LORD has made to us through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Do you trust this covenant promise? With Christmas upon us, do you believe this man Jesus came for you? It is easy for us to get wrapped up in the birth of Christ at this time of year. But let us always remember all of what Christ did for us— From his supernatural virgin birth to his chain-breaking miracles. From his suffering on the cross to his victorious resurrection and glorious ascension. From his current interceding for us on the throne to his soon-coming total defeat of Satan, pain, and death for all eternity, bringing peace to all upon whom his grace rests.

Let's pray.