

The Lord Himself Will Give You A Sign

Isaiah 7:10-16

King Ahaz and the people of Judea were in deep trouble. World war was brewing and Judea was a small player in the world-wide drama of empire. Two kings and their armies were marching toward Jerusalem and Ahaz and all the people were terrified. The Northern Kingdom of Israel along with Aram (the King of Damascus) were marching against Ahaz and Jerusalem to de-throne Ahaz and put in his place a puppet king who could ally with them to fight the rising world power of Assyria.

Into the midst of those very unsettled times the Prophet Isaiah addressed Ahaz the King of Judea. *“Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be as deep as Sheol or high as heaven.”* But Ahaz, a seeming paragon of virtue, replied that he would not put the Lord to the test. *Hogwash!* Isaiah in essence tells Ahaz. *You would not be putting God to the test; God is putting you to the test. When God gives you a sign, take it; pay attention to it; heed it!*

And so Isaiah prophesied that God himself would give Ahaz a sign. *“Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. ... 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.”* Immanuel means *God is with us*. Isaiah was prophesying to King Ahaz to trust that God was with them. The pregnancy of the young woman and the birth and naming of the little boy would be a sign that God was with them. King Ahaz should trust God and not be afraid. The kings and kingdoms that Ahaz was so afraid of would themselves be overthrown. A Davidic King would continue to rule Jerusalem.

As Isaiah first prophesied it, it is a somewhat ambiguous sign. Who is the young woman who is with child? Was it Isaiah’s wife? Was it a wife or concubine of King Ahaz? Yes, God would be with them, but how would Ahaz defeat these two kings? And then what? What about the threat of the rising tide of Assyria itself?

God has a way of recycling Biblical prophesies. A prophecy in one historical context gets remembered and passed on and is used again in a later context. The sign of Immanuel is one of those prophesies that is recycled and is re-applied. That context 750 years later is the angel Gabriel visiting the Virgin Mary. She is the young woman (which can also be translated as *a virgin*) whom the Angel Gabriel visits and announces that she will conceive and bear the son of the living God. And that child – Jesus – will be *Emmanuel – God with us*. The name *Jesus* or *Joshua* means that *God will save*. Mary receives this amazing news and wonders how it could be? *“The Holy Spirit will come upon you (Mary), and the power of the Most High will overshadow you,”* the Angel Gabriel tells her, *“therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called the Son of God.”*

Unlike King Ahaz, Mary received the angel’s prophecy with grace and belief: *“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”* And so for Christians Mary is known, among many other titles – such as the Virgin Mary and the holy Mother of God – as *Our Lady of the Sign*.

You were handed a small print of an icon with your bulletin this morning; it is an icon – a holy image – of Our Lady of the Sign. Look at the icon. What is pictured here is the meaning of that moment of the Annunciation when Mary said *YES* and God’s Son was conceived within her womb. Mary has her hands raised in prayer. There are cherubim and seraphim surrounding her. She is tranquil and at peace. And there, pictured at her waist is the image of Christ. Jesus is not pictured as in a sonogram as a tiny baby growing in Mary’s womb, but as a tiny, childlike yet very adult Lord and King. He is pictured within a mandorla. There is mystery surrounding him. He is robed in red and blue – symbols of earth and heaven. His right hand is raised in a sign of blessing. He is *Emmanuel*, God with us. And this will be a sign for all people that God is with us.

In the Eastern Orthodox Church, who gives us this holy image of our Lady of the Sign, typically use this icon as a key figure in the Iconostasis. The *Iconostasis* is a wall covered in icons placed between nave of the church and the chancel. It is similar to a *rood screen* in some Western churches. 5 tiers of icons were developed in the Iconostasis representing the vast sweep of the Biblical story of our redemption in the saving life and work of Jesus Christ. At the bottom or ground level is the holy door of entrance into the sanctuary. The door is placed between an icon of Mary the mother of God and an icon representing Jesus’ second coming at the day of judgment. Everything that takes place takes place between those two. On either side of these two icons are images of the church’s patron saint or holy day. The second tier is called the *Deisis* or *prayer*. The Lord Christ seated on the throne is at the center. To his right is the Virgin Mary and to his left are John the Baptist, each inclining their heads to him in reverence and prayer. Behind Mary and John the Baptist are the Archangels Gabriel and Michael and them the Church Fathers, each inclined in prayer and reverence towards Christ at the center.

The third tier is made up of icons representing the 14 festivals of the Church Year. The fourth tier is made up of the great figures of the Old Testament representing the prophets who pointed the way to Christ. At the center of the tier of prophets (and thus also at the center and near the top of the Iconostasis is our icon of our Lady of the Sign. The 5th tier (when there is one) is made of icons of the 12 Apostles.

And so at the sweep of the whole great story of salvation (which we have caught a glimpse of today in the retelling of Advent lessons and carols) our Lady of the Sign stands at the top and center.

How will we each receive this sign (this sign that God is with us)? Will we refuse it like King Ahaz or will we receive it with the amazing grace of Mary? It is a sign to all of us. Will we risk believing that God really is with us? Will we believe that the sign is given to each of and that we too can bear the life of God’s Son Jesus? In all our worries, in all that troubles us, in all our fears, our doubts and our uncertainties will we still trust in the sign of Emmanuel?

- A sign that God is still with us, no matter what danger or threat or problems causes us anxiety, that God is with us.
- A sign that God is acting in the world still
- A sign of hope
- A sign of expectancy
- A sign of blessing

- A sign that Jesus our Lord brings life and hope and healing.

Our Lady of the Sign of Emmanuel is before us this morning. I invite you to take this icon and the sign God gives us and take it with you into this Advent season and the celebration of Jesus' birth.

