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A Sign from the Lord
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Isaiah 7:10-16
Matthew 1:18-25

Isaiah 7:10-16, "Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, **Ask a sign of the LORD** your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. Then Isaiah said: 'Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? **Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.** 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.'"

Ready or not here comes Christmas. We're not surprised by the timing of Christmas—it tends to arrive about the same time every year. We know Christmas is coming so at some point we begin confessing our sins (because we remember the message of John the Baptist), we attend worship, clean and decorate, make or buy gifts, send cards, bake cookies, etc. When we expect something eventually, at some point, we start preparing for it. If you're a student and you know you have a final exam on Friday, you begin studying by Monday (right?), or at least you try to remember to show up for the exam (which Nathan told me, doesn't always happen). If you have a big project at work, you break it up into smaller parts that make the huge job seem less intimidating. Or maybe you don't. So, we're all ready for Christmas, or maybe we're not, because some of us still have trouble getting ready for what **we know** is coming in part because it feels like we have more to do than we have hours to complete it all. It's much easier to plan for and prepare for events **we expect and know are coming**, such as, Christmas, a final exam, or a project, than it is to deal with challenges, disappointments or heartaches that come suddenly and unexpectedly like a car accident, a lay-off, an illness, or the death of a loved one. Our hopes for the future can be forever altered when unexpected disappointment invades our lives. It's important to try and look for signs from the Lord that God is with us even in those moments of disappointment or surprise.

The passage we heard earlier from *Isaiah 7* and the one I'll read in a moment from *Matthew 1* feature a pregnancy and the birth of a child. In some cases, a pregnancy and the birth of a child can be the fulfillment of a dream as it is for **Smart & Yazel Ruth Sabangan** whose four-week-old baby boy, **Ysaiah**, we dedicated to the Lord today. In other circumstances, an unexpected pregnancy can be a life-altering surprise. This morning's Gospel reading is about how Joseph and Mary deal with an unexpected, unplanned pregnancy. It's about how they respond to an unexpected change in their plans and their futures. Some unexpected changes can be wonderful surprises, like family or friends showing up to visit. Depending on our circumstances, the Christmas season can be a time of celebration, joy, laughter, and fun, or a poignant emotional time of grief, heartache, loneliness or disappointment. Sometimes it's a mixture of both. During the unexpected changes and heartaches in our own lives, the story of

Jesus' birth reminds us that God is with us no matter what, and we're wise to look for the Lord's presence even in the smallest signs.

Matthew 1:18-25 (NRSV), "Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, **she was found to be with child** from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, **being a righteous man** and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, **do not be afraid** to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'

"All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, **he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him**; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus."

We all handle unexpected or depressing news in different ways. Some of us go to bed and try to sleep away our problems because we feel overwhelmed by them or don't want to face them. Other people engage in risky behaviors. Some of us work out or go for a long run or walk. Sometimes we remember to turn to God for help and guidance. In *Isaiah 7*, King Ahaz is terrified of two rivals, King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah of Israel, who are planning to attack Jerusalem and take away his kingdom threatening the continuation of the line of King David. The prophet Isaiah tries to assure King Ahaz by telling him he can ask the Lord for a sign, any sign, because the Lord is **not** going to let this happen (*Isaiah 7:7*), **"it shall not come to pass."** The Lord God wanting to buck up the king's courage, tells Isaiah to implore King Ahaz, **"If you don't stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all."** Ahaz is afraid to ask the Lord for any kind of sign, so Isaiah tells him a young woman is pregnant and will give birth to a son and while that child is still young, the threat the King is worried about will be gone. Often a sign from the Lord is not something big, loud or obvious. For the prophet Elijah, when he was depressed and fleeing for his life, the sign of the Lord being with him was not in an earthquake or fire, but in a moment of sheer silence. The prophet Isaiah tells King Ahaz, the sign will be the birth and growth of a baby.

Like *Isaiah 7*, the Gospel passage also touches on the birth of a baby. Joseph is a godly man and when Mary shared that she was pregnant, his plans were totally upset. **When unexpected disappointment disrupts our lives, we want to avoid the mistake of planning before praying.** Our prayers may come *after* we have already decided what to do and then we're merely seeking God's confirmation or blessing of what we have chosen to do without the Spirit's input. In the film *Gettysburg* about the most significant battle of the American Civil War, Confederate General Robert E. Lee decides to hurl his troops unnecessarily

against the Union forces dug in on the high ground along Cemetery Ridge—a move even a private could see was doomed to fail. When his subordinate, General Longstreet protests, Lee says, “It is all in God’s hands now.” Longstreet says to himself, “God isn’t sending those boys up that hill.” Sometimes prayers and plans can be like that. We decide on our plan, and then say it’s in God’s hands, it’s God’s will and we ask God’s blessing on action that God had no hand in shaping and perhaps no desire to have happen. Just because something happens doesn’t mean it’s what God wanted to happen. Human free will and evil are factors that cannot be dismissed.

Remember, Joseph is a carpenter. A carpenter is trained to make plans and follow plans. Details matter to a woodworker. Measure twice, cut once. Joseph’s work reflects his life: structured and well-ordered. *Matthew* says Joseph went to sleep that night with a plan. He had made up his mind to dismiss Mary quietly, without exposing her to public disgrace. However, as many of the *Psalms* say, when we’re lying on our bed at night often God will instruct us. Often this happens because it’s the only time we’re quiet and still enough that God can speak to us. *Psalms 16:7* says gratefully, “I bless the Lord who gives me counsel, **in the night also my heart instructs me.**” God had a plan and a purpose for Joseph and Mary and a plan for the world. It was a plan that included the birth of a baby who came to teach us about God’s unconditional love. Christmas reminds us that Jesus came so that we can be saved from our failures and mistakes; because Jesus was born, we’re also never truly alone—God is with us. “An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’” (*Matthew 1:20b-21*) Joseph awakes from sleep a new man. What a startling, shocking and yet comforting announcement. His disappointment is replaced with reassurance. Mary was telling the truth. God is not always silent in our unexpected disappointments.

Verse 24 says something important to us, “When Joseph awoke from sleep, **he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.**” When Joseph wakes from sleep, he **does** what the angel of the Lord commanded him to do. Joseph has the courage to act in response to the sign he receives from the Lord. God’s story of salvation hinges on Joseph’s obedience amid his unexpected disappointment. Mary gets far more publicity and attention than Joseph, perhaps deservedly so. We never hear about Joseph after Jesus’ childhood, and it’s very likely that he died before Jesus began his ministry. Mary on the other hand is present at Jesus’ death and is praying with the first believers when the Holy Spirit comes upon the early church. She’s the one portrayed in great works of art for centuries to come and who appears on the cover of magazines. Mary gets the publicity, but Joseph is the one in *Matthew’s* gospel who has a critical decision to make.

He can doubt what Mary said and ruin her life. Or he can believe what she and the angel have said and defend and stand by her. Three times in *Matthew's* account of Jesus' birth and infancy, Joseph is visited by an angel who tells him to do something. Three times Joseph gets up and does exactly what he's been told to do. Any wife will tell you, that's a great husband. We never hear Joseph speak a single word. His actions speak louder than words. When God's messenger tells him what to do, he's not portrayed as doubting, questioning, fearful, bargaining, or controlling—**he acts**. God's story of salvation hinges on Joseph's obedience in his unexpected disappointment, and Joseph has the faith and courage to do what needs to be done.

When we're faced with unexpected or untimely disappointments in life, we face a similar challenge as King Ahaz or Joseph and Mary. How will we respond? We may come up with a plan of our own without consulting the Spirit of God. We can look for even small signs that the Lord may be with us and guiding us. We can seek God in prayer, search the scriptures and seek the wise counsel of spiritually mature friends. Maybe for us, like Joseph, God's plan could involve a message that comes from outside ourselves from a friend, or the Bible, or even a messenger of God.

The plan we come up with on our own may make sense to us. God's plan often involves the unexpected, the surprising, we may not like the odds or the challenge. I'm not saying we don't use our minds, we should apply all our intellect to our faith, but like Joseph and Mary it's important for us also to listen to and obey what God asks us to do even if that may at times seem unexpected or surprising.

Those of us who worship God don't just listen to angels, scriptures or sermons. We **do** what God commands. Even if it seemed then or still seems incredible to us today, Mary and Joseph believed God and believed that God could be trusted. Those are choices we all face, and they set the direction of our life. Do we believe in God and do we believe God can be trusted?

Finally, this passage reveals what Jesus' name means. Joseph and Mary are to name the baby Jesus because he will save us from our sins. God sent Jesus because God knows there will be times when we turn a deaf ear to God's instructions for our life and our relationships. There will be moments when we fail to respond obediently. There will be seasons in our life when we are overwhelmed by unexpected disappointment and so we question God and fail to trust. There are times we may get so distracted, busy or self-focused that angels could be singing "Go, Tell It on the Mountain" in our living room and we wouldn't notice. Yet if we ask God for forgiveness, if we're willing to embrace the new beginning, we're reminded of each Christmas, Jesus will save us from our sins. He will be Immanuel, God with us, in all the seasons of our life, in the joys and celebrations as well as in the grief and disappointments.

Joseph lives in obedience to a principle that is central to Matthew's presentation of Jesus and the Gospel (***Matthew 9:13***), "**Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not**

sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” Joseph acted mercifully to Mary. The plans and hopes Joseph had for his life would never be fulfilled. God had other plans. However, Joseph and Mary had the satisfaction of knowing that **in the unexpected events of life, even in our disappointments, God may do something very significant in us, with us, and through us.** God may use us to bless other people. I know there are people struggling today for a host of reasons. Jesus is a gift that is offered to all of us and he can help us, but we must decide if we will accept the gift. Remember the message of Christmas is about how in the gift of Jesus, God offers all of us new life, new beginnings and hope in our disappointment, depression, heartache, and grief. Spend some time this week expressing gratitude to God for sending Jesus to the world for you and remember the twelve days of Christmas **start** on Christmas Day. There’s no law that you have to throw out your tree and put all your decorations away two days after Christmas. Give Christmas time to linger in your heart and in your home. God gave you the greatest Christmas gift you’ll ever receive. Let God know what that gift means to you.

Through Joseph, Mary and their baby Jesus, God is telling us all: You are loved unconditionally. You are not alone. Don’t give up. Keep the faith. Keep on believing. Henri Nouwen said, “This is the great conversion in our life: to recognize and believe that the many unexpected events are not just disturbing interruptions of our projects, but the way in which God molds our hearts and prepares us for his return.”

Prayer. Heavenly Father, Lord Jesus Christ, indwelling Holy Spirit—I hear you whisper, “Your life is unfolding right here where you are. I am always breaking in with something new and fresh and alive. I have prepared a place for you in my plan that will give you the greatest joy and satisfaction in life. Be part of my new creation!” Lord Jesus, give me courage to leave the details to you and follow. May your will be done in my life. Amen.

Blessing. May you know the nearness of Christ this Christmas and may the joyful hope we share in this bright season guide and sustain you all your days.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What fearful situation is King Ahaz facing (see *Isaiah 7:1-9*)? What has happened to disturb Joseph in *Matthew 1:18-25*?
2. What situation(s) are you facing that upset, concern or worry you? What makes it hard for you to trust God in fearful times?
3. Have you ever had the experience of following your own solution to a difficult situation rather than trusting God’s solution? What happened?
4. What positive qualities about Joseph’s character are revealed in *Matthew 1:18-25*?
5. What do we learn about faith from Joseph?
6. How have you experienced Jesus as “Immanuel,” God with us?