

“Life! in the Shadow of Empire”

Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – December 21, 2025
Fourth Sunday of Advent – Love

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might learn to trust in
the ways of your love, even in the face of fear. In the name of the One Coming Into the
World we pray, Amen.*

Friends, we're almost there! On this last Sunday before Christmas, we celebrate Love, knowing that the Christ Child will be arriving any moment now. Every three years or so, we read this passage from Isaiah 7, in conjunction with the verses from Matthew 1 that tell the story of Joseph's first dream. We might assume, at first, that the connection between the two is the baby whose arrival is being foretold. Never mind that one story names him Immanuel and the other calls him Jesus. We are happy to combine it all together into "God, who saves, is with us!" Or perhaps the connection is the young woman in each passage. The young woman that Matthew, in his urgency to connect Jesus to the Hebrew scriptures, turned into a virgin because he was using the Greek translation of Isaiah rather than the original Hebrew version. Sometimes it really does make a difference which words we choose!

But I want to suggest today that there is another way to look at the connection between these two passages: they are both stories of men who were fearful but wanted to be faithful, who are then surprised by God presenting a different path to faithfulness

than the one they thought they were supposed to take. At first glance, you might not assume that Joseph, a carpenter from Nazareth, had much in common with Ahaz, King of Judah, the Southern Kingdom. But there are some important similarities. Joseph was living under Roman occupation. Ahaz was fearful because two neighboring kingdoms were on the attack, trying to conquer Judah. They were both pious Jews, well-versed in the laws and traditions of their faith. But they were both also humans, and therefore, not averse to taking the easy way out.

In order to stave off an invasion from Syria and/or Israel, King Ahaz was considering forming an alliance with the Assyrians, who were even more powerful. It was not uncommon for Hebrew leaders to ask their prophets for a sign or a word from God, when they were in need of guidance in difficult situations like this. But when Isaiah invites Ahaz to seek a sign, he demurs, quoting scripture to the holy man about “not putting God to the test.” But Isaiah sees through this false piety, knowing that Ahaz is really just afraid; he’s so afraid of what he thinks is coming that he’s convinced the plan he’s figured out is best. He doesn’t want to be invited to do something harder, like trust God in the face of fear. But he’s been around Isaiah long enough to know that if he’s offered a sign, that’s probably exactly what’s going to happen.

Joseph’s reaction cannot fairly be called false piety, but then again, he didn’t have the weight of an entire kingdom on his shoulders (that he knew of). He is also feeling worried though and leaning into his faith. It seems that in matters such as this, he has

options. Were he a zealot, he could have put Mary through all sorts of humiliation. But the story makes clear that he is not; Joseph is a man of love, a righteous man who doesn't want to hurt her, even as he washes his hands of the situation. He doesn't have a court prophet to turn to, so God sends an angel to him in a dream. "Do not be afraid," he is told. The angel reiterates that the child is "from the Holy Spirit," which the story implies has already been named. Did anyone, least of all Joseph, know what that meant? I'm guessing no. But what he might have suspected is that it meant God was going to do that thing that God does, where humans think things are going to go one way, assuming that power and might demonstrate holiness and favor, when in fact God has chosen to up-end everything with something tiny and vulnerable – like a baby. You do not have collaborate with the powers of the world, God told these fearful men. Trust me, I am doing something here. And yess, with a baby.

That sign that Ahaz was given, somewhat against his will, it did sound promising, but it was still a bit ambiguous. We don't know who the "young woman" was. Some scholars assume it was Ahaz's wife; some think it was the prophet's wife. Some assume it was just some woman that might have been nearby. We can just as easily assume that it was any and every woman in Ahaz's kingdom. The point in that situation was not the who but the when. The woman was already pregnant, so the baby would be coming soon. The thing that is less clear is at what age the prophet thinks a child can "refuse the evil and choose the good." Is this just about the child's idea of

good and evil, so it's a two-year-old who has learned to say "NO, NO, NO" to anything they don't want to do? Or is it actually a sense of morality, like a seven-year-old who can very clearly tell you when something isn't fair? It does not seem like the prophet is encouraging the king to hold on until the child is old enough to major in philosophy. The implication is that it will be "how long? not long!" before that child will be eating the food of national security. Curds are milk that has been processed, as opposed to milk that needed to be consumed quickly. Honey is a food that you can only cultivate if you're not living life on the run. Honey requires stability, patience, time. It is a symbol of the sweetness of safety.

In the face of empires, God spoke to these worried men about babies, about sweetness and vulnerability, about life! That is not the strategy most of us would assume would be most helpful in trying to navigate the intricacies of political and social relations. How do I keep my army together, God? Well see, there's this baby coming soon, and he's going to be adorable; he's gonna get that honey all over his face, and it's going to bring you so much joy. How do I get out of this complicated situation, God? I mean, I really like her, but I don't understand how this happened. I get that it seems weird, but oh my, this baby; you're going to want to be around for this.

We've been "preparing for the Light of Christ" this Advent. We are clear that empires are not a thing of the past. We live under similar pressures and threats, some of us more than others, but none of us immune. Wars and rumors of wars. Hunger,

limited access to health care, exploitation of children. Rampant dishonesty and manipulation. Discrimination, displacement, environmental collapse. In this season of dark nights, God says to us, “how about a baby? a baby would help!” John tells us “what has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.” That sounds kind of nice, but a baby? We may be as disgruntled by the sign we’re offered as Ahaz was. Something more powerful might have been more reassuring.

We come seeking light in the darkness, and God offers us life. Life that is the sign of God’s love. Life that is longer lasting than empires, more compelling than social conventions, more powerful, even, than death. Like Ahaz and Joseph, we need not fear, though nations totter and the mountains crumble into the sea, for God, who saves, is with us. Love will carry the day, every day! Hallelujah and Amen.