

Sermon for December 22, 2013 – Advent 4

Isaiah 7:10-14(NKJV)

Theme: See the sign of God's great love.

¹⁰ *Moreover the LORD spoke again to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹ "Ask a sign for yourself from the LORD your God; ask it either in the depth or in the height above." ¹² But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, nor will I test the LORD!" ¹³ Then he said, "Hear now, O house of David! Is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will you weary my God also? ¹⁴ "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.*

Christmas is supposed to be a time of joy and happiness. And yet, Christmas is when many face their worst depression and sadness. Why? Well, some people try to blame it on the cold weather; or the fact that there is less sunlight. . . but I don't think these are the real causes of Christmas depression. I think this seasonal sadness has more to do with expectations than anything else.

You see, the world tells us that Christmas is all about being with family, expressing love by giving nice gifts, and knowing that you're loved by getting gifts in return. But here is the problem: what about those whose families fight or do not have any friends? What about those who can't afford to give expensive gifts? What about those who don't receive anything?

The truth is that if Christmas is merely about family, human love, gifts and giving . . . then it's understandable why some might become sad and depressed. But thankfully Christmas is not about those things. It's about something far greater. Christmas is about God's forgiving love towards us – a love that is so unimaginably great, that He bore with patience the sin of man so that He could send His Son, His only begotten Son, into the world to be sacrificed in order to forgive the sins of all. Christmas is about God not wanting anyone to be without Him, so He came to make his dwelling among us. Christmas is about an incredible gift – the gift of God himself

Let us search for true joy this Christmas and, with the prophet Isaiah as our guide: **See the sign of God's great love for us.**

Before we consider our text for this morning, let us consider the context that surrounds it.

The prophet Isaiah, who lived around 700 years before Christ was born, was chosen to preach to the stubborn people of Judah who refused to listen to God's call to repent of their sins. Ahaz was the king of Judah, during this time, and he was a very wicked king at that. How wicked? So wicked that he set up altars to foreign gods on every street corner in Jerusalem (cf. 2 Chronicles 28:24). He even burned his own sons in a sacrifice of fire to these idols (cf. 2 Chronicles 28:3). Sadly, the people of Judah followed Ahaz in this wicked idolatry.

Not only was Ahaz a wicked king, but he wasn't a very good ruler either. Bad diplomacy put Judah in a precarious spot. Israel and Aram were upset with Ahaz for trying to form an alliance with the ruthless Assyrians. They were ready to attack Judah because of this, and Judah did not have the means to defend itself. Things looked bleak. . . until the LORD sent Isaiah to give Ahaz some good news. The LORD, remembering his promise to Abraham, was not going to let the armies of Aram and Israel destroy Jerusalem. The LORD wanted to Ahaz to acknowledge Him as God, and trust in him only.

Isn't this amazing love? Think about all the things this wicked king had done to displease the Lord. He, together with most of Judah, rejected the LORD. They worshipped other gods in the most disgusting ways, and yet the LORD still cared for Judah. He wanted Ahaz and all of Judah to repent and turn to Him in faith. He wanted to be their one and only God.

This is why the LORD says: *"Ask a sign for yourself from the LORD your God; ask it either in the depth or in the height above."*

Isn't this also amazing? The Lord is in effect telling Ahaz, "Ask me for anything and I will do it. I want you to know that I am the LORD your God. I want you to know that, in spite of all your sin and rebellion, I still love you and want to save you. Perhaps then you will repent of your idolatry and believe in me. I do not want you to die in your sin. Let me prove my saving love for you."

What amazing love God has for us sinners! But how was it received? *Ahaz said, "I will not ask, nor will I test the LORD!"* Can there be any greater degree of insolence and spite for the LORD than this? In a show of religious piety, Ahaz refuses God's invitation. He is, in effect, rebuking the LORD for making him such an offer - quoting Deuteronomy 6:16, which says: "Do not test the LORD your God."

Now it must be said that if I prayed (with no direction on the part of God): "LORD, I will only believe in you if you give me a million dollars," I would be testing God and therefore sinning. But if God came to me, as He did to Ahaz, and commanded, "Ask me for anything and I will do it," then not to ask for anything would be a great sin. It would be despising God's gracious command. When you really ponder how hypocritical Ahaz's answer was, considering that he had no respect for the LORD in the first place, one can't imagine a person being more impudent towards God.

Sadly, Ahaz' response is all too common in the world today. The LORD reaches out to the unbelieving world in love - calling it to repentance and faith. And how does the world respond? The world tries to tell God what His Word should really say. The world rebukes God for not being "loving" enough to condone homosexuality. The world rebukes God for not allowing anyone to believe whatever they want. And not only does the world do this, but we - still having a sinful human nature - are tempted to do the same whenever something happens that we don't think is right, or come across a difficult teaching of Scripture. Instead of accepting God's invitation to believe and receive his gracious love, our sinful nature tempts us to doubt and stay away. But the LORD is merciful to us. *If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself.* (2Ti 2:13 NKJ) *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness* (1Jo 1:9 NKJ)

But Ahaz did not repent. No, his answer was filled with spite and unbelief. This is why the prophet Isaiah retorted: *"Hear now, O house of David! Is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will you weary my God also?"* It is one thing to reject the prophet's warnings, but to reject God's grace when it is handed to you on the proverbial silver platter? This is sinning against the Holy Spirit; and Jesus says that such sin is not forgiven. Why not? Because it is a continual rejection of the only thing that saves: God's mercy and grace.

Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel. If Ahaz would not ask for a sign demonstrating the LORD's love for him, than the LORD himself would offer a sign: a great sign of His love for the whole world to see and rejoice in. But, because of his rejection, it would also be a sign that Ahaz would never live to see or believe in. There would be a virgin in Judah who would give birth to a son whose name means: "God with us."

Now, you and I know what this prophecy means and how it was fulfilled! Some 700 years after this wicked King died, one of Ahaz' own descendants - a virgin named Mary - gave birth to this promised son. Jesus is his name. He is our "God with us."

Christmas is the celebration of the Immortal, Almighty God clothing himself with frail, mortal humanity. He did this so that He could suffer and die for the sins of all mankind, regardless of how horrible those sins were, or whether or not the people he came to save would ever believe in him.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: God does not want us to ask Him for a sign so that we might believe Him. Why not? Because He has already given us the most marvelous sign of his love imaginable. He has given us himself – born of a virgin, born under law to redeem us who are under the law. God came to be with us – to be a human being in order to die for our sins and conquer death through his resurrection. He did this so that we might live with Him forever in heaven. But this is not the only way He is our: Immanuel. . He is our "God with us" in Baptism and whenever we receive Holy Communion. He is our "God with us" every time we meditate on His Word. He is our "God with us" right now as we gather for worship, as Jesus promised: *where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.*" (Mat 18:20 NKJ) And even when we are not at Church, Jesus remains our "God with us", as he promised: *I am with you always, even to the end of the age.*" (Mat 28:20 NKJ)

God dwelling with us, God reuniting Himself with His fallen creation, God forgiving and living at peace with man – it is in these promises that we find true Christmas joy. But the world misses it all. Why? Because the world is like King Ahaz: it doesn't care one bit about God's promises. This is why the world celebrates an empty Christmas. Sure, people will say, "Happy holidays," post Facebook pictures of elves on shelves, tell their kids about Santa Claus, and try to cheer themselves with decorations and gifts. But none of these have any real value or meaning – and I think a lot of people know this is true, regardless of whether or not they acknowledge it. Christmas without Christ has no purpose.

Dear Christians, God has revealed to us the true meaning of Christmas: it's the celebration of God's great sign of love for fallen man. It's the virgin giving birth to Immanuel – God with us. It's God reconciling the world to himself through Jesus so that we might have true peace with him. Keeping focused on this great sign of love, you will not be depressed at Christmas - even if you have to spend the season all alone. Even without a tree, gifts, stockings, candles, lights, tinsel and snow, we can have a most wonderful Christmas, knowing that when we remember Jesus' birth in faith, Jesus himself is present in Spirit to celebrate Christmas with us – calling our attention to himself: the sign of God's wonderful love.

Now, let us be like Isaiah and share this sign with others. Invite your friends and relatives to come to our Christmas Eve and Day services. Tell them about how much the Lord loves them, how He wants them to believe and be forgiven. Some will listen and come. Unfortunately others might act like Ahaz and refuse. But even if they refuse, keep on inviting. Share the sign of God's love with them as God shared it with us. This is the true spirit of Christmas. Amen.