

**EASTSIDE COMMUNITY BAPTIST CHURCH**  
**2<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY OF ADVENT – DECEMBER 6, 2020**  
**SERMON: “THE OTHER SIDE OF CHRISTMAS...”**  
**TEXT: ISAIAH 7:10-16**

Don't you wish that the decision-making process was stress-free and simple! Having to weigh out the pros and the cons of any given situation. Struggling to determine if you are making the right or wrong decision and trying to cover every angle. We do this in the monstrous and in the minute situations of life. Towards the end of my seminary days we would get to the final weeks of school when all our assignments were due. At times it would be overwhelming, especially if you were a procrastinator like myself. I remember one year when I had several five-page papers due – not really a huge struggle and they seemed to be fairly minor to my grade. I contemplated not doing all of my papers until I weighed the pros and the cons of not doing the paper. I figured in my head my grade to that point and realized that a simple paper, unfinished, would mean the difference between an A in the course and a C or D in the course. This helped me to make my decision.

One of the most popular Advent/Christmas readings from scripture is found in Isaiah 7:10-16. A portion of this verse has been put on posters, greeting cards, and the lyrics have been used by song writers for centuries. The text is part of decision that a king had to make...for or against God. Much of the world misses the true meaning and ramifications of the decision which shows us a much darker side of Christmas. Let's start by reading this portion of Isaiah:

### **The Sign of Immanuel**

**<sup>10</sup> Later, the LORD sent this message to King Ahaz: <sup>11</sup> “Ask the LORD your God for a sign of confirmation, Ahaz. Make it as difficult as you want—as high as heaven or as deep as the place of the dead.”**

**<sup>12</sup> But the king refused. “No,” he said, “I will not test the LORD like that.”**

**<sup>13</sup> Then Isaiah said, “Listen well, you royal family of David! Isn’t it enough to exhaust human patience? Must you exhaust the patience of my God as well? <sup>14</sup> All right then, the Lord himself will give you the sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means ‘God is with us’). <sup>15</sup> By the time this child is old enough to choose what is right and reject what is wrong, he will be eating yogurt and honey. <sup>16</sup> For before the child is that old, the lands of the two kings you fear so much will both be deserted.**

## SETTING

For the first time in Judah’s history, Jerusalem is being seriously threatened by her enemies. King Ahaz, the grandson of King Uzziah, sits on the throne, has a decision to make, and is scared to death!

In order to protect the kingdom, He must decide to make an unholy alliance with the lesser of his enemies so that he can protect his kingdom. To make matters worse, one of the enemies is the kingdom of Israel. Israel is the blood brother of Judah. In walks the prophet Isaiah to muddy the waters.

While the king is in a place of solitude, the upper pools, Isaiah is sent by God with a message for the terrified King. The message was the God would give Ahaz the victory and would protect his kingdom. Not only will God protect the Kingdom, but he will punish those who would bring evil to Judah. The key to this plan is that Ahaz “must believe what God says, or Ahaz will fail.”

To prove that God is being honest with Ahaz, Isaiah invites him to pick a sign, any sign, great or small, and God would accomplish it to prove himself. The choice is up to Ahaz. He can exercise a childlike faith by trusting God, or he can panic and ask the world for help. Isaiah lays down the ultimatum “If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all” (Is. 7:9).

Ahaz was a thoughtful leader who had reason to fear his enemies. One of the reasons he was at the upper pools was to see how much water was available should his enemies surround Jerusalem and form a blockade. Even though Ahaz would know the old stories of how God protected the faithful, it must have

seemed like a foolish request to not act but give it over to God. All of his advisors would be telling him, “don’t just stand there...ACT!”

Unfortunately, the reality of the situation was the Ahaz had already decided to ask the Assyrians for protection instead of trusting in God. Ahaz tries a religious excuse and quotes Deuteronomy 6:16 prohibiting the testing of God. The problem was, God was the one who initiated the invitation for testing. Why was it a problem to bring Assyria in for assistance. When this was done politically, Judah would have to offer allegiance to the false gods that Assyria worshipped. Once again Judah would compromise their beliefs.

#### THE SIGN OF IMMANUEL

Isaiah scolds Ahaz for his unbelief and tells him that if he won’t pick a sign, the sign would be given to him. That sign is what we call the “Sign of Emmanuel.”

**<sup>14</sup> All right then, the Lord himself will give you the sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means ‘God is with us’).**

#### TWO-EDGED SWORD

In today’s world, especially within the Christian realm, we take great comfort and rejoice that God is with us! It might surprise you to know that the sign was not welcomed by Ahaz or the nation. The sign of Emmanuel meant that Israel, who betrayed Judah, would suffer and be devastated. “God with us” is either comfort or calamity!

The world has lost any sense that the reality of Christmas is something that should not be taken lightly. What does it really mean that “God is with us – Emmanuel”? It means that judgement is at hand and a decision must be made by each person. It is still the same decision that Ahaz had to make – trust or reject; have faith in God or side with the world.

I have to laugh, when each year I read news articles stating that this government or that government has declared that Christmas is not religious. That is ludicrous! It is like saying that Hanukkah is not Jewish, or

Ramadam is not Islamic. The world may try to re-define Christmas as secular, but the sign has still been given. Are you for God or against God?

I am not sure if you have ever had this type of conversation with your family and friends, especially those who are not Christian. Sure, you can celebrate Christmas secularly, but there is no real reason to celebrate it. I have heard the world respond that they are celebrating "Peace and good will." That is great...but where does the foundation for that celebration come from? Could it be angels on Judean hillsides announcing the birth of the Messiah!

May Advent be a wakeup call to believers and unbelievers alike. I am all for celebrating Christmas and enjoying the trappings of Christmas, but we need to make sure we don't bury Emmanuel in paper, tinsel, bows and turkey dinners. I have heard many excuses why people don't show up to Christmas Sunday services or Christmas Eve services, because they are spending it with family, after all, Christmas is all about family. That is true, but it isn't about our earthly family but the divine one who took on flesh and dwelt among us. Emmanuel – God with us – is the forerunner to the fact that at some point:

***<sup>10</sup> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
<sup>11</sup> and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:10-11).***

As we celebrate the birth of Emmanuel, may we be reminded of need for an on-going relationship with Jesus and may our hearts be stirred to do all we can to bring the true message of Christmas to all around us. Emmanuel not only brings comfort, but he comes to bring the final judgment. May we bow at his name willingly rather than being forced to acknowledge the Lord and Saviour.

Let's pray...