

# The Promise of a Bright Future

## Advent 4A

Text: Isaiah 7:10–16

December 23, 2007

## The Promise of a Sign

During Advent, we hear the good news that  
God promises us a *Bright Future* in his Kingdom...  
a future where we experience a world of peace and well-being.

- The 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Advent, we heard the promise of peace.  
The word of God spoken by Isaiah assures that us there will be a day  
when God's Kingdom will come  
and his peace will reign over all the earth.

On that day people shall  
*beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks;*  
*and nation shall not lift up sword against nation,*  
*neither shall they learn war any more.* Isaiah 2:4

- The 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Advent, we heard the promise of a Messiah.  
We are assured that God will send an anointed one,  
who will be the means by which the world is transformed  
from a wasteland of hostility into a kingdom of peace.

Isaiah tells us,  
*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse...and*  
*The wolf shall live with the lamb,*  
*the leopard shall lie down with the kid...* Isaiah 11:1 & 6

- The 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Advent, we heard the promise  
that when God's Kingdom comes in its fullness  
it will bring wholeness and well-being  
to the world and to our lives.

We hear from Isaiah  
*the desert shall rejoice and blossom...*  
*and the eyes of the blind shall be opened,*  
*and the ears of the deaf unstopped.* Isaiah 35:1 & 5

Today, we hear the fourth promise of Advent—  
the promise that God will give us a sign to assure us that  
the promise is being fulfilled before our eyes.

In the reading from Isaiah,  
we hear the conversation between the prophet and King Ahaz  
where Isaiah encourages the king to trust in the promise of God.  
The scene between Isaiah and Ahaz  
would be funny if it wasn't  
so typical...and sad.

Ahaz has a major problem on his hands.

Israel, the northern kingdom of the 12 tribes of Israel,  
has entered into a military coalition with the Arameans  
which threatens the security of Judah, the southern kingdom.  
That coalition pits Hebrew against Hebrew, brother against brother—  
somewhat akin to the Civil War  
that tore apart our nation 150 years ago.

Ahaz is scurrying like crazy to forge an alliance with the Assyrians  
to stave off the threat this Israelite-Aramean alliance  
poses to his kingdom.

As the frantic king tries to seal the deal,  
Isaiah encourages him to trust in God,  
not in political alliances.

When Ahaz rejects Isaiah's admonition  
and stubbornly pushes ahead with his plan,  
the prophet says,  
*Ask God for a sign if you don't believe me.*  
Good Hebrew that he is,  
Ahaz is not about to *put the LORD to the test.*

*I will not put the LORD to the test.*

That's an honorable thing to say when it is rooted in faith.  
But these words of Ahaz are not a declaration of faith;  
they are a diversionary tactic to cover up his doubt.  
Ahaz will not ask for a sign because his faith in God is too small  
to believe that God is big enough and mighty enough  
to bring about the peace that will put an end to his peril.

When Isaiah hears enough of the king's false piety,  
he says in essence,  
*OK buster, 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.*

Such a common sight, isn't it—  
a young woman with a baby in her arms!  
We see that sight all the time.

Yes, Matthew uses this text to point to Jesus as the anointed Son of God—  
cue the recitative *Behold a Virgin Shall Conceive*  
from Handel's oratorio *The Messiah*—  
but Isaiah is not talking about a supernatural or cosmic event.  
He is talking about the every day wonder of life itself—  
the birth of a little child.

But that has staggering implications for our lives

if we stop to think about it.  
 God gives us great promises—

- the promise of a peaceable kingdom...  
 and a messiah to bring that kingdom  
 to our lives...
- the promise that this kingdom will bring  
 wholeness and well-being to our lives  
 creating life anew within us—
- and the promise that God gives us signs all over the place  
 encouraging us to trust  
 the promises that are given.

But while the promises are great,  
 the windows through which we see them being fulfilled  
 are often small and ordinary events  
 that is easily overlooked or missed.

If we do not believe the promises of God,  
 it is not because God is too weak or too small  
 to fulfill the promise that he has made;  
 it is because our faith is not big enough  
 to trust in the God who shows  
 his power and might at work in the world  
 in small and unpretentious ways over and over again.

Just like Ahaz,  
 you and I try so hard to do everything on our own.  
 We think we are responsible  
 for everything that happens.  
 We think that for the kingdom to come,  
 we have to do something  
 to make it happen.

We don't—we can't!  
 Only God can bring in the kingdom—only God can give us true peace—  
 the peace that calms and sustains us even in the eye of the storm—  
 only God can deliver us into his kingdom of grace.

When the Hebrew people were caught between  
 Pharaoh's army and the deep blue sea,  
 they panicked thinking their death was at hand.

Moses said to the people,  
*Do not be afraid, stand firm,  
 and see the deliverance that  
 the Lord will accomplish for you today...  
 The Lord will fight for you,  
 and you have only to keep still.*

A short time later,  
the people watch as Moses  
stretches out his hand over the sea,  
and the Lord drives back the waters of the sea  
and the Israelites go into the sea  
on dry ground

During Advent, we hear the promise of God  
that the day is coming when his anointed Messiah  
will establish his kingdom of peace in the world.

Do we or do we not trust God  
to deliver us into his kingdom  
and give us peace!

The signs are everywhere.

Do we have the eyes of faith to see them?

Do we have the depth of faith to trust the promise?