

GOD WITH US – HOPE

Years ago, a submarine was rammed by another ship and quickly sank to the bottom of the ocean. The entire crew was trapped inside that submarine. Many boats rushed to the disaster, but no one knew what was happening in the submarine during those few hours underneath the water. Men bravely clung to all the oxygen that they could get until, slowly, it gave out. One diver who came to the rescue, swam down and put his ear to the side of the submarine and listened. The diver heard tapping noises - someone was banging out a message in Morse code. The message was a question: 'Is there any hope?' That question, is the cry of all humanity. Is there any hope?

Today we are starting our Christmas series entitled Christmas Through the Eyes of Isaiah. Over the next few weeks, we will be looking at prophecies given by Isaiah relating to the birth of Jesus.

Isaiah 7:7 Yet this is what the Sovereign LORD says: " 'It will not take place, it will not happen, 8 for the head of Aram is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is only Rezin. Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be too shattered to be a people. 9 The head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is only Remaliah's son. If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.' " 10 Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, 11 Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights. 12 But Ahaz said, "I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test." 13 Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also? 14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

I often hear Isaiah 7:14 read around Christmas, prophesying that a virgin would give birth to a coming savior. What most people do not understand is the story that is behind this prophesy.

In the chapter before this (Isaiah chapter 6) we read about Isaiah's call to ministry. It occurred in the year that king Uzziah died. That was a very difficult year for Israel. Uzziah had served as king for more than 50 years. He had been a good king and now there were many uncertainties which Israel had to face. At that desperate time God met with Isaiah and asked "who will go for me and who can I send." Isaiah responded "here I am, send me!" For more than 20 years Isaiah spoke God's words to the nation.

Now, more than 20 years later, Uzziah's grandson Ahaz is king. The nation had been divided: there was the Northern Kingdom, called Israel ruled by a king named Pekah; and there was the Southern Kingdom, now called Judah, ruled by Ahaz. Israel wanted to conquer Judah but did not have the power so Israel had forged an alliance with its northern neighbor Aram to attack Judah. What can we learn from this scripture this morning? Three things:

1. Adjust your FOCUS - (vs. 1-9) do not fight spiritual battles with earthly weapons

This was a very pivotal moment in the history of Israel as a nation. The threat to the nation was very great, but God had promised that everything would be OK. In verse 7 God says that the war "will not take place, it will not happen." The armies of Israel and Aram were a powerful force. Ahaz had a choice, and his choice would decide the future of the nation. He could either trust the words of Isaiah and believe that God would protect them or he could try to figure out how to defeat the armies of Israel and Aram on his own. In the end, Ahaz did not listen to Isaiah. He did not trust that God was in control and he did not believe that God would win the victory for him. Instead, he took matters into his own hands and cut a deal with the nation of Assyria to protect him.

In asking the Assyrians for help and coming under their protection, Judah became a vassal state of Assyria. A vassal state is “A holder of land by feudal tenure on conditions of homage and allegiance.” Judah gave itself to a foreign nation. God had given the land to Israel. Even though it was rightfully theirs they gave it away to Assyria out of fear. They were still able to live there, but they had sold their birthright. Historically we know that this was not very wise. When Babylon rose to power and started invading Jewish lands, Assyria was not there to rescue them because they had already been conquered. All of the plans were meaningless. Eventually Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem and burned it to the ground and there was no one there to help.

So what can we learn from the actions of Ahaz? This Christmas we need to remember that God is in control. Sometimes we can forget that. Most of you know that for 10 years I was a pastor at a church in Kuwait. When I left in 2009, the church was large and growing. Over the next few years, a number of pastors came and went, dividing the people. Since then, there have been many problems and attendance is dropping. Only a handful remain. Last year there was an electrical fire and the church burned to the ground. It is so hard to see something that you love and worked for years to build being torn apart.

It is with the same sense of helplessness I see our nation being torn apart. I believe that we as a nation are at a very pivotal moment in our history. There are huge shifts in our culture. Christianity is being increasingly marginalized in our society. Churches are being burned. Freedom of religion is quickly becoming freedom from religion. We are facing economic collapse and recession. More and more people do not have enough money to feed their families and home ownership is becoming impossible for young people. Crime is out of control. Drug addiction and homelessness is at an all-time high.

All around the world we see problems. As it says in Romans:

Romans 8:22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

In the midst of all these challenges we need to remember that we do not fight spiritual battles with earthly weapons. If you watch the news or look at social media you will see so many people offering their advice as to what needs to happen or what should be done. It is foolish human wisdom.

1 Corinthians 1:18-21 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." 20 Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

1 Corinthians 2:14 The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

We cannot expect the world to truly understand what is happening today because the events we see are part of a spiritual battle that is raging around us. They require God's wisdom to understand. They are not just human events but spiritual realities that can only be understood through the Spirit.

Like Isaiah reminded Ahaz so many years ago, we need to be reminded this Christmas that God is good and that He is in control. Like Ahaz, all of us have a choice. We can try to face the challenges that face us through our own wisdom and strength, or we can trust in God and look to Him to be our shield and our defender.

During World War II, a US marine was separated from his unit on a Pacific island. The fighting had been intense, and in the smoke and the crossfire he had gotten himself lost. Alone in the jungle, he could hear enemy soldiers coming in his direction. Scrambling for cover, he found his way up a high ridge to several small caves in the rock. Quickly he crawled inside one of the caves.

Although safe for the moment, he realized that once the enemy soldiers looking for him swept up the ridge, they would quickly search all the caves and he would be killed. As he waited, he prayed, "Lord, if it be your will, please protect me. Whatever your will though, I love you and trust you. Amen."

After praying, he lay quietly listening to the enemy begin to draw close. He thought, "Well, I guess the Lord isn't going to help me out of this one." Then he saw a spider begin to build a web over the front of his cave. As he watched, listening to the enemy searching for him all the while, the spider layered strand after strand of web across the opening of the cave. "Hah, he thought. "What I need is a brick wall and what the Lord has sent me is a spider web. God does have a sense of humor."

As the enemy drew closer he watched from the darkness of his hideout and could see them searching one cave after another. As they came to his, he got ready to make his last stand. To his amazement, however, after glancing in the direction of his cave, they moved on. Suddenly, he realized that with the spider web over the entrance, his cave looked as if no one had entered for quite a while. "Lord, forgive me," prayed the young man. "I had forgotten that in you a spider's web is stronger than a brick wall." We all face times of great trouble. When we do, it is so easy to forget the victories that God would work in our lives, sometimes in the most surprising ways. Adjust your focus...

2. Anchor your FAITH - (vs. 10-12) don't worry about hurting God's feelings

Isaiah 7:10 Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, 11 Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights. 12 But Ahaz said, "I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test."

God told Ahaz to ask Him for a sign. He knew that Ahaz had weak faith and was willing to encourage him by showing him in a practical way that He was in control and there was no need to worry. In other words, God was willing to help Ahaz to trust Him. Ahaz responded to God's invitation by refusing to ask, saying that he would not put God to the test. He was worried about hurting God's feelings.

Remember God is the one that had invited Ahaz to ask. God was inviting Ahaz into His presence. Asking God for a sign was not the problem. Ahaz's failure to ask that was the problem. Sometimes we are like that as well aren't we? We are afraid of hurting God's feelings.

When was the last time you got really angry and shouted at God? Not shouted out TO God, but shouted AT God? He has invited us to come into His presence, recognizing that we come as broken and imperfect people. God does not mind when we come to Him in pain. What He does mind is when we think that we have to have our act together before we can come into His presence. When we think that we need to perform some ritual or ceremony in order to meet with Him in a sterilized, impersonal way. He wants us to come as we are. Bruised and broken, to come.

This Christmas God wants to remind us again that he wants to meet with us. He has invited us into His presence and wants to have a relationship with us. God has provided for us so many opportunities to build our faith and our trust in Him, but how often we fail to make the most of those opportunities.

Paul Harvey used to tell the story of the 3-year-old boy who went to the grocery store with his mother. Before they entered the grocery store she said to him, "Now you're not going to get any chocolate chip cookies, so don't even ask." She put him up in the cart & he sat in the little child's seat while she wheeled down the aisles. He was doing just fine until they came to the cookie section. He saw the chocolate chip cookies & he stood up in the seat & said, "Mom, can I have some chocolate chip cookies?" She said, "I told you not even to ask. You're not going to get any at all." So he sat back down. They continued down the aisles, but in their search for certain items they ended up back in the cookie aisle. "Mom, can I please have some chocolate chip cookies?" She said, "I told you that you can't have any. Now sit down & be quiet." Finally, they were approaching the checkout lane. The little boy sensed that this may be his last chance. So just before they got to the line, he stood up on the seat of the cart & shouted in his loudest voice, "In the name of Jesus, may I have some chocolate chip cookies?" And everybody round about just laughed. Some even applauded. And, due to the generosity of the other shoppers, the little boy & his mother left with 23 boxes of chocolate chip cookies. We ought always to pray and not give up. Adjust your focus and anchor your faith...

3. Anticipate your FUTURE – (vs. 13-14) don't forget that God has a plan for you

Isaiah 7:14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

God responds to Ahaz' failed opportunity by giving him a sign anyways. The sign God would give pointed to the birth of Jesus. God had a plan, and that plan was that a savior would be born.

God wants to remind all of us this Christmas that He has a plan for our lives.

Because Ahaz made a pact with Assyria, they were protected for a short time. A few years later the Assyrians would come and destroy the Northern kingdom of Israel, thus removing the immediate threat. However, the Babylonians eventually grew in power and overthrew the Assyrians. In time they would come and destroy Judah. Eventually the Persians would rise to power and let the exiles return, but Israel would never be the same. The Persians would be defeated by the Greeks and eventually Israel would be occupied by the Romans.

The point in all of this is the fact that God had a plan. Because of the Babylonians the nation of Israel was spread out all over the ancient world, resulting in synagogues being built in every city. The Persians would return the remnant to their homeland. The Greeks would establish a common culture and language so that people all across the area were able to understand and communicate with one another. The Romans built a series of roads which allowed for easy transportation across their empire. By the time Jesus was born, the stage was set. After His death the gospel quickly spread on Roman roads in Greek language through the synagogues across the Mediterranean. What seemed like a tragedy at the time was actually a glorious triumph.

What can we learn from this? No matter how bad things seem, God has a glorious plan for your life. No matter what situation you find yourself in, God is in control.

About 700 years after Isaiah spoke these words, a group of angels appeared to shepherds announcing;

Luke 2:10-11 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

The savior that Isaiah had prophesied about had finally been born. But the story of Christmas did not end with the birth of Jesus.

After the death of Jesus the news about Him continued to spread. As the Apostle Paul spread the Gospel around the Roman Empire eventually it came to a town in southern Turkey called Myra. A church was eventually planted there and years later a young man from a Christian home became the bishop. During the time of the Roman emperor, Diocletian there was a time of great persecution of Christians. This young bishop was thrown into jail and was going to be killed for his faith, like so many others had already been killed for their faith. However, God had a much greater plan for his life. Miraculously, Constantine the Great replaced Diocletian as emperor. Constantine accepted Christ and proclaimed Christianity the religion of the Roman Empire. The young bishop of Myra was saved!

That young bishop was set free and went on live a long and productive life. He was one of the Bishops that attended the first Council of Nicaea from which we have the Nicene Creed “We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth...” He was well known and loved and had a reputation for generosity and compassion. He was a man of prayer and his ministry was marked by many miracles. So much so that when he died he was made a saint by the church. That bishop’s name was Nicholas, and of course he is known today as Saint Nicholas.

Because of his great love and his generosity, he came to exemplify the spirit of giving at Christmas time. After the protestant reformation in Germany in the 1500s his transformation into Santa Claus began. In Protestant churches he was called Kriss Kringle, derived from Christ kindle, which means Christ child. Dutch settlers to America introduced him as Sint Nikolaas or Sinter Klaas, which soon became known here as Santa Claus.

Over the years, the truth was lost to legend and the man was lost to myth. In America in the early 1800’s the stories of Washington Irving began about Santa and with his red suit, reindeer and sleigh. These were followed by the cartoons of Thomas Nast and the 1822 poem by Clement Moore, which begins, “Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.” Coca-Cola ads in the early 1900s put a face to jolly old Saint Nick.

When we strip away all the myth, what is left is an ordinary man, who was saved by God’s Grace and was faithful to God’s plan for his life. This Christmas we need to remember again that God has a wonderful plan for your life. No matter the circumstances. No matter what we see happening in the world around us. No matter what we see happening around us and no matter how secular we see society around us becoming.

If you are feeling hopeless this Christmas I want to tell you there is hope. No matter what happens, God is in control. The same God that saved Nicholas from that prison so long ago can save you in whatever prison of fear you find yourself in this Christmas. Adjust your focus, anchor your faith and anticipate your future.