

Let us pray,

Lord, remind us to trust you above everything else.

Amen.

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Ahaz says; “I will not put the Lord to the test”

We have used this scripture line as a way to justify blind faith.

We have told people who doubt, and want a sign, that they should not force God to provide that sign because “they should not put the lord to the test.”

Its important to note that this line was not spoken out of fear that God would get mad for being tested.

Quite the contrary, this line was spoken out of fear that God would actually show up and provide what was asked of Ahaz.

Ahaz was afraid of what God was going to say.

Sometimes, the scariest thing in life is the thing that God is asking us to do.

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You see, the 12 Kings of Israel and Syria were joining forces to go to war against Assyria.

The reason for the attack isn't very clear, but what is clear is that they want Ahaz, who is the king of Judah, to join forces with them.

Ahaz is reluctant and is afraid of Assyria.

And because of his fear of this dominant military power, he fears that if he goes to war with them, that him and his country will lose even more than they already have.

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Isaiah is trying to remind Ahaz to stay firm and loyal to the God of Israel and not to succumb to earthly fears.

Isaiah tells Ahaz, ask God anything and he will do it!

But Ahaz is afraid, he is afraid of losing, he is afraid that the God of Israel isn't enough.

So he thinks the only way to save himself and his kingdom, is to surrender and join forces with the Assyrians against Israel and Syria.

Because of Ahaz's fear of loss and death, he chose to trust in human power, rather than the God of Israel.

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Ahaz's betrayal helped Assyria win the war against Israel and Syria, and the temple and all Israelite customs and rituals were wiped away for pagan customs and rituals.

Essentially, Ahaz decided to desert the God of Israel completely. Clearly Ahaz is not afraid that the God of Israel would be mad at him.

Confirming that this statement of "do not put your lord to the test" isn't about fear of God's punishment or judgement.

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Instead, the fear lies in the call of God and the fear of losing his own power and country.

As we see, God welcomes testing.

God wants us to test God and seek what God is actually calling us to do.

Isaiah begs Ahaz to please test God.

And even when Ahaz says “no thank you”, Isaiah provides him with a prophecy anyway, a test of God’s commitment to God’s people.

But alas, Ahaz lost faith in God and chose the Assyrians and their gods as his new protectors.

In the short term, he was right and he kept his life, but at the cost of all of his identity and allies.

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You know in the discernment to be a Pastor, we were tasked by our call committees and seminary professors to really ask God and pray with God for clarity on whether or not we should be going into this line of religious work.

We were constantly reminded that being a pastor is not the highest form of a vocation.

It was the, you aren’t as special as you think you are, kind of talk. We weren’t going to get any brownie points in heaven for being a Pastor, and we were reminded that our baptismal vocation was plenty.

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So instead of looking at the pastorate as something set above, we were tasked with looking at the pastorate as something set apart.

We were constantly reminded that being a Pastor is not easy, that the church is dying, and that especially in this period in American history, being a religious leader comes with great scrutiny and judgement, especially from the secular world.

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During our first year at seminary, our one professor would almost every class remind us that we don't have to be pastors and that we can quit now.

She would often tell us that we should only become a pastor if we feel like we can't not be one.

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It was almost like we had an anti-isaiah, one who came to us and said, get out of here, join the Assyrians, save yourself!!

Quite a few took that warning, and left for secular positions.

This isn't meant to be a judgement on those who left, we need people who have a strong sense of call in the pastorate.

So if the call isn't strong, there is no shame in leaving.

But here is my point.

Our professors and call committees were trying to remind us, that choosing a life for God, is not choosing an easy life.

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But here is the reality, that I think maybe they missed.

Life is hard either way.

Its also safe to say that not all pastors are martyrs.

The job can be hard at times, but so can every job.

The point is that every choice we make will include hardship.

Whether that is choosing to follow God or to not follow God.

To be in religious life or to not.

And that is the realization, the heart of what Ahaz didn't realize.

That deserting God and choosing to put his trust in human power, didn't make his life any easier, in fact he ended up losing

the part of his soul that provided him hope, strength, endurance through suffering and his family.

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The lesson here is that in our attempts to avoid suffering, we tend to make decisions that in the short term look like they will make us happy or help us feel better, or keep us safe.

But in the long run destroy our sense of self, our sense of community and our connection with the cosmos and our God. We are called to put God to the test and to not be afraid of the answer.

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But here is why our professors were so adamant about telling us how hard being a Pastor is.

You see, they have been around the block long enough to know that many people joining religious life think it may be easier.

But religious life isn't about making life easier, its about making life more meaningful.

Its about following God.

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This week we will be celebrating the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ.

And because of Mary and Joseph's yes to God's will, we were given the greatest gift that all of humanity has ever seen.

The gift of forgiveness and grace.

I hope that we can learn from Mary and Joseph's yes, and Ahaz's no.

That a yes and a no to God, both come with their challenges.

But a yes brings the messiah into the world, and no can lead us away from what makes life worth living.

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Test God, hear God, and go forth and be who God is calling you to be.

Do the thing you just can't not do, and take God's call when you hear it, it's worth it.

Not just for you, but for all people.

Amen.