

Stories of the Promise 4) Isaiah – “Promises Made”

Isaiah 7:1-17 • December 22, 2019 • Sermon Series for Advent



My youngest is just starting to get the hang of walking. She's at that stage where she will walk but only if she knows it will be safe. If you set her off walking after something, she will take a few steps, but then plop back down to the floor for a nice safe crawl. But if she sees that there is someone to catch her at the end, she will walk the whole way across the floor. She sees mom or dad and she knows that her walk will go just fine or that they will be ready to catch her. This assures her that all is well and she's safe. I guess you could say she trusts us. Isn't that what our walk of faith is often like? Don't we need to have assurance from God, constant reminders of his love, his presence, and his plan to keep us from harm? And when we don't have that before our eyes we plop down from our walk of faith and attempt what we deem to be a safer mode of existence. Instead of standing in faith and looking at God we end up crawling around with a crippling fear. God once spoke to a king of Jerusalem words which still ring true today. After putting many promises right before king Ahaz's eyes he said to him, "If you do not stand firm in your faith, then you will not stand at all." Today we see just how true that is.

Ahaz sort of stands out in the line of the house of David. His father and grandfather both served the Lord, but Ahaz didn't. Maybe you know someone like him. He totally turned aside from his godly family which had long worshipped the Lord into complete disregard for the Lord. And it wasn't enough for him to worship false gods. He closed the temple doors in Jerusalem and put up a copy of the altar for the false gods of Damascus. He offered up child sacrifice. He bribed other nations with the temple treasures collected by his father and grandfather. He is listed as one of the worst kings to sit on the throne in Jerusalem.

When Ahaz opened his eyes to the world around him, he was ready to fall down to the ground and crawl. The King of Israel to the north and the King of Aram had made an alliance against Ahaz. They plotted to completely destroy the southern kingdom of Judah. They killed 120,000 of Judah's best soldiers and carted off 200,000 men, women, and children as prisoners and plunder. Their next step would be to decimate Jerusalem and divvy up the land between the two nations. They were saying things like, "We will rip them open!" So, naturally, King Ahaz and the people were all terribly afraid. It says their hearts were trembling like trees in a forest shaking in the wind. Ahaz was crawling around in fear, desperately trying to secure an ally, desperately trying to prepare the water supply of Jerusalem for a terrible siege. Instead of standing in faith he was staggering in fear.

You might say to yourself, "Yeah, wars happen. Terrible things take place. Anyone would be afraid and crawling on their knees if that was happening to them." But this was no ordinary city with no ordinary throne. Ahaz was on the throne of David. His kingdom is called "the house of David." He had promises from God that David's line would never end. God had said a king would sit on David's throne and bring a rule of peace to the ends of the earth. Ahaz had taken his eyes off the promise and off his God. He should have been standing in faith instead of crawling in fear.

Has your world ever been so shaken? Like Ahaz, you have promises from God. You are part of his promised kingdom of peace; it extends over all the earth. Like Ahaz you have been told that you can stand on the Lord's promises. He has promised for each of us peace, protection from danger, prayers answered, and an eternal place in his kingdom. Like Ahaz many of us have been blessed to hear that promise and have Christian family. But how much does it take to make us crawl in fear instead of standing firm in that faith and holding to those promises? There may not be 120,000 dying around you. But what if one or two people very close to you die a tragic and unexpected death. Doesn't your heart begin to shake like the trees in the wind? And where do you find yourself when the security is sucked out of your life by a threatening disease, illness, or financial loss? Ahaz found himself turning to everything but the one place he should turn. He tried to bribe the king of Assyria to fight on his side. He tried to imitate the false worship of the people around him. Christians can end up turning to alcohol, sinful addictions, and turning away from the one thing they really need when crisis hits. The Word of God can be left untouched because they are too busy fighting off a major crisis. You and I can find ourselves with hearts that tremble and hands that grope around the floor because we're afraid of falling and hurting more.

But the Lord does not desire that anyone who bears his name tremble with fear. The Lord sent the prophet Isaiah and his son to king Ahaz. And he gave him several reassuring words. "Calm down. Be Quiet. Do not be afraid or let your hearts be afraid because of the fierce anger of your enemies." He then goes on to describe the things that cause Ahab and the house of Judah fear as merely smoldering stumps. With a really neat picture of Hebrew idioms which most translations don't capture he says, "Don't be afraid of their burning nostrils (their fierce anger) because they are like smoking burnt stumps... stand firm in faith." God was basically saying to Ahaz and the house of David, "Look at me. Keep your eyes on me and my promises and you can stand firm. Don't fall down onto your knees to crawl in fear. Those things that threaten you will not succeed. They are nothing. I am your everything. Trust me. Stand in faith and trust me. Anything else will fail you."

The writer to the Hebrews tells us to do the same when he says, “fix your eyes on Jesus.” We may face many things that will drive us to fear and cause us to drift away from the faith. We will see our own weaknesses and sometimes panic into fear. Our hearts tremble at times like trees swaying in the wind. But Jesus says to us, “Trust in me. In this world you will have many troubles but take heart because I have overcome the world.”

Ahaz, sadly, didn't take to heart these words. But God is gracious. Even though Ahaz did not deserve anything good, God still gave him a promise to hold onto. He still called him part of the “house of David,” namely, the household that held God's promises! Ahaz had God's gospel to stand on. And the Lord spoke again and gave an incredible offer to assure Ahaz of his promise. “Ask for a sign (something to show you my word is true), whether in the deepest depths or the highest heights.” Very seldom does God ever invite someone to ask for a sign. He often refuses signs to those who demand one. But here he graciously offers Ahaz to pick one and be assured of the Lord's Word. Ahaz is so confident he'll be better crawling to the king of Assyria that he completely dismisses the offer. In fact he insults Isaiah and the Lord. “I won't ask for a sign or test the Lord.” He'd rather keep crawling on his own than receive something to assure him the gospel promises he holds are good!

Wouldn't you love it if God would comfort you with so many words and such signs when fear strikes you? He has and he does! Every time someone has shared the gospel with you the Lord has assured you that you need not fear anything! Every opportunity you have to read his word, study it, hear it, listen to it preached, gather together is another invitation from your God to “Calm down, remain quiet, do not be afraid, do not let your heart tremble like the tottering trees in the wind.” And every time we decide that his Word isn't what we need in time of crisis we turn aside like Ahaz did from the goodness of our God. Every time we think, “I first have to fix this myself” before we even mediate on God's promises and turn to him in prayer, we insult to the God of grace and his Word. Isaiah says to Ahaz “Isn't enough that you try the patience of people that you now are trying the patience of your God by dismissing his promises!” God graciously gives us his Word and sacraments to keep us standing strong. He graciously sends these things into our life even when we don't deserve them or heed them as we ought. When distress and fear come, so does his comforting gospel. Dare we ever to dismiss it or disregard it in even the slightest way?

Though Ahaz refused to look to the Lord, God himself would give a sign. “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and he will be called Immanuel - in Hebrew that name means “God with us.” “You want me to show you that my promise is good?” God asks. “Aram and Israel will not happen. They will not defeat you. But this will happen. A miraculous and unexplainable birth will take place. A woman will conceive though she has not ever been with any man. And she will bear son. That son will not be an ordinary child. He will be God himself in human flesh with his people.” Matthew writes in his gospel account of a man who discovers that the woman he is betrothed to is pregnant. He immediately has to assume that she was unfaithful to him and that's how she got pregnant. His life no doubt was toppling down as he decided he'd have to call off the marriage with her. But an angel of the Lord comes to him in a dream and tells him, “Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what has been conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”²² Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: **²³See, the virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will name him Immanuel,** which is translated “God is with us.”

The rest of this prophecy in Isaiah 7 speaks of the promised child being born into a time of poverty. He'd eat curdled milk instead of fresh milk and instead of cultivated crops have scavenged food like honey. And the land of Israel would suffer defeat and remain defeated long past Ahaz's lifetime. It would remain that Israel would be dominated by foreign powers right up through the birth of this child. But the promised child would be the long-foretold offspring of David, a shoot coming up from a small stump. His heart would never waver in the wind but would faithfully stand as he fulfilled all prophecies for the kingdom of David. At this sign fulfilled we can stand in faith knowing that God keeps his promises. The virgin gave birth and the Messiah was born to bring us the promised peace. God himself with us to save us!

Jesus, the virgin's son, true man, and Immanuel, true God, continues to fulfill everything prophesied. He lived in poverty and lowliness. He spoke good news for the poor and of the forgiveness of sins. He conquered sin by dying on the cross for us and he conquered death by rising to life again. He is now ruling over all the ends of the earth and peace is proclaimed in his name. And he promises peace to all who stand in faith looking to him. There is nothing you face that his Word cannot calm. “Peace be with you. Do not be afraid. Trust in God. Trust in me.”

And he tells us that if you do not stand in faith in him you will not stand at all. You can turn to all other sources of hope, but only Jesus will carry out what we really need. Sadly, Ahaz disregarded the promises and the sign. He did not stand in faith. He instead sent a bribe to the king of Assyria and came crawling on his knees looking for help. Ironically that became his very downfall. “If you do not stand in faith, you will not stand at all.”

You and I are standing in faith with our eyes on Jesus and the promises foretold and promises fulfilled. We don't stand by our own strength or wit. Like a child we stand by faith, confident in his love and his good plan for us. Over and over again he graciously reminds us that we are part of his household, and by grace we are in the story of the promise.