

Series: Here Comes Heaven

**Here Comes God with Us**

Sermon by Pastor Emeritus Larry Renoe

Isaiah 7:14, 9:6-7

Waterstone Community Church, Littleton, Colorado

Sunday morning, December 15, 2024

Bob: As we enter into the story of advent together, we reflect on the people of Israel's journey to seeing the promised birth of the Messiah fulfilled through the words of God's prophet. Today we meditate on the foretelling of the Emmanuel, that is, "God with us." This prophecy is perhaps one of the most well-known about Jesus and one of the most precious, for in it we find the promise that God would send his Son to come and live among his people, to rule over them, and usher in the peace of his presence. We light a candle today as an act of remembrance of the people of Israel's journey, God's faithfulness in fulfilling his promise through the sending of his Son, and as an acknowledgment of our place in the story.

A reading from the words of the prophet Isaiah: "Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Emmanuel . . . For to us a child is born. To us, a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders, and He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, and of the greatness of his government and peace, there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this," the word of the Lord.

Larry: One of my seminary professors, Haddon Robinson, began a sermon with this story. There was a woman in the Midwest, married, about to retire, saved her money all her life for a trip to Europe. The time came. She was going to go first from the Midwest to London, and then from London to Paris, Paris to Rome, and Rome to Venice. The time came. She takes her trip, takes off, flies to London, calls her husband back in the Midwest, and says, "How are you doing?" Her husband says, "I'm doing fine, but Lucy died." Lucy was their cat. The woman breaks down and bawls her eyes out on the phone. She composes herself and then says to her husband, "You insensitive brute. Why did I ever marry a person like you? You have no concern for my feelings." Her husband absorbed that and then asked the question, "Well, how should I have told you about Lucy?" The woman thought for a minute, and she said, "When I called you from London, you could have said, 'Lucy is on the roof,' and then when I got to Paris, you could have said, 'Lucy fell off the roof,' and then when I got to Rome, you could have said, 'Our cat Lucy, she is not doing well,' and then when I got to Venice, you could have said, 'Lucy died.'" Then the woman asked her husband, "How is mother doing?" and the husband said, "She is on the roof."

Have you ever wondered about God's sense of timing? Have you ever wanted to know, or have you ever asked for a sign to know that something might be coming or which way to turn at a certain point in your journey? Have you ever wondered if God is actually in the mix with you, in those hardest days? Is He nearby? We are all going to have to trust somebody, because in our life there is bound to come some trouble. Would it not be great if we had someone to trust with some credibility, and what credibility does God offer as we walk this life with Him?

Welcome to Here Comes Heaven. We are looking at Christmas through the eyes of the prophets, and as Bob said earlier, perhaps there is no greater, more well-known prophecy, Old Testament to New Testament, than Isaiah Chapter 7. Waterstone, here is your sign. Make of it what you will. Isaiah chapter 7, verse 14: “Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call Him Emmanuel.”

Today we would like to ask two questions about the sign. The first question is this, “What did the sign mean to the original audience, the first hearers, the recipients of the sign?” Let’s ask that question first. I am going to ask you to really work on staying with me. We are going to go back 2700 years of history and live in that world for a while. I think it is really going to be a lot of fun. Then we are going to ask what the sign means for this age and our time and your life. So first, we will see what it meant 2700 years ago, and then what it means for you now. Does that sound like a plan? All right.

It is the year 735 B.C. Things are scary for the people of God. What is happening is that there’s an empire, an evil empire in the north. You may have heard of them, Assyria. They’re on the rise. Their capital is Nineveh, in modern-day Iraq. They are on the move southward, and their goal is to connect central Asia to Egypt. They are going to come around the eastern cradle of the Mediterranean Sea, swallowing up every small nation in their path, nations like Syria, nations like Samaria, what used to be the northern kingdom of Israel. In fact, the northern kingdom of Israel, which we will call Samaria, and their neighbor Syria, are hearing all the rumors about Assyria coming down, and they decide to form a rather unusual alliance, and they partner together and say, “We are going to turn on Jerusalem, the southern kingdom of Israel, and force them to join us to fight Assyria. We will fight Assyria off as long as we can.” So, the people of God’s greatest concern is that these two small countries, Syria and Samaria, have turned on them, and they are forcing them to join the fight. At the end of verse 2, it says that they are shaking like a tree in the wind. It is a scary time for the people of God.

Then we see what God does. We see his response. In Isaiah 7 verse 3, we read, “Then the Lord said to Isaiah,” Isaiah is the great prophet of the southern kingdom of Israel, Judah, “Go out, you and your son Shear-Jashub,” I have practiced that a hundred times this weekend, “to meet Ahaz at the end of the aqueduct of the upper pool, on the road to the launderers’ field,” pause. In the Hebrew, that is an eight-word description, and there is no other description like it in scripture, eight words. It is more accurate than Google Maps. They are meeting because Ahaz is checking the water supply for the city of Jerusalem, in case there is a siege, so they are by the aqueduct of the upper pool on the road to the launderers’ field, three people, Isaiah, his son, and King Ahaz. He is the king of Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel. He’s twenty years old, and he does not have a clue what he’s doing. Isaiah says to him, “Be careful, keep calm, and do not be afraid.” “Keep calm. Do not be afraid.” Why? We go on: “Do not lose heart, because these two,” they are the leaders of Samaria and Syria. This is trash talk, by the way, in case you are not picking it up, “They are smoldering stubs of firewood.” What does that mean? No danger, no fire, just smoke, just a pain. There is nothing to them, “Because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram of the son of Remaliah.”

All right, so the people of God, they are shaking like a tree in the wind. There are threats of war, rumors of war, not only from Assyria, but also their own neighbors are turning on them and saying, “We are going to resist this,” so this twenty-year-old King Ahaz, he has a choice to make. We see it in verses 7 through 9. Helmut, I think I am just going to jump to the next slide, in verse 9, the very end. Here is the

crux of the matter: “If you do not stand firm,” what is interesting is all the second-person pronouns have been singular, but here they change to plural. “If you,” plural, the people of God, “do not stand firm in your faith, you,” the people of God, “will not stand at all,” and Ahaz is the test case. What is Ahaz going to do? Here is the crux of the matter for Ahaz. Here is the decision that he has to make. Either twenty-year-old King Ahaz, leader of the people of God, trusts God and leaves Assyria to Him, or Ahaz trusts political power to broker a deal with the king of Assyria, so that they can resist not only Assyria, but also their neighbors Syria and Samaria. Here it is: will Ahaz seek deliverance by human politics or by God’s promises? That is the crux of the matter.

So, what happens next? God goes on and says through Isaiah to Ahaz, “Ahaz, ask me for a sign. I will give you a sign.” Now we remember in scripture that generally, whenever God gives signs, that is, miraculous miracle events or foretelling the future, listen, those signs are not to create faith. They are to reveal faith. God wants to know what He is dealing with, with Ahaz and the amount of faith he has in his heart, and what happens next? After Isaiah says, “Ahaz, hey, ask God for a sign.” Ahaz says, “Oh, I could not do that. I could not tempt God.” This is feigned pious piety. “I could not do that,” and then, I can’t wait to meet Isaiah in heaven. Here is what he says next, verse 13: “Then Isaiah said, ‘Hear now, you house of David,’ exclamation point. “Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also?” I just want to pause here and have you think about this idea for a moment. We often think of Isaiah 7:14, “The virgin will conceive and bring forth a son.” “How sweet. How tender, a baby’s head against a chest.” I am telling you, when Isaiah says it, he is hacked off: “Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Emmanuel.” The next verses go on to say this that when this child grows up to the age of twelve years old, it is an interesting Hebrew phrasing, “old enough to reject the wrong and choose the right,” he is talking about Bar Mitzvah. Before this child is Bar Mitzvah-ed, become a son or daughter of God, twelve years old, “The enemies that you are so concerned about will be no more,” and sure enough, in 732 B.C., Assyria comes down and swallows Syria. Ten years later, in 722 B.C., they come down further south, and they swallow Samaria, and they are no more. No more. That is the sign.

Now really quickly, there are two interesting things about the sign. The first is this, in Isaiah 7:14, when it says, “a virgin will conceive,” that is not the most accurate translation. I think even the writers of the English, the translators are pre-empting a little bit. The word is the word “alma.” Now stay with me. We are going to dig a little deep this morning. There are three possible word choices for this idea. It could be the word “issa,” which means “wife,” and Isaiah and God do not say it. No, it is not issa, and then they do not say it is “bathoula.” “Bathoula” is the Hebrew word for virgin, strictly a virgin. No, the word used in the Hebrew text is the word “alma.” “An alma will conceive.” What does alma mean? It is a very ambiguous, seldom-used term in the Old Testament, but it means a young woman of marriageable age. It could be a virgin, but it is wider than that. It is larger than that. It is like Isaiah is saying, “I’m going to put a word in there so that maybe when they visit it in the future, they will have more to say about it, but for now, just understand it is a young woman of marriageable age,” and the second important thing to know is not only the word, but in front of the word there is a word, “the,” a definite article. It is not “a woman.” It is not, “a young woman of marriageable age.” It is, “the woman of marriageable age.” It is a specific person. Who is that person?

You read a little further in the text, and you get to Isaiah chapter 8, and you read these words: “The Lord said to me, ‘Take a large scroll and write on it.’” This is Isaiah, “with an ordinary pen, ‘Maher-shalal-hash-bash,’ so I called in Uriah the priest and Zechariah the son of Jeberechiah as reliable witnesses for me, and then,” here we go. Merry Christmas. “I made love to the prophetess, and she conceived and gave birth to a son.” This is Isaiah and his wife, and the Lord said to Isaiah, “Name him Maher-shalal-hash-bash, for before the boy knows how to say ‘my father’ or ‘my mother,’ the wealth of Damascus,” that is Syria, “and the plunder of Samaria,” that is northern Israel, “will be carried off by the king of Assyria.”

Just what is happening in all this narrative? You are like, “Larry, what is going on?” The sign is this, that Isaiah and his wife will have a child. The birth of that child will be called Emmanuel. This is the sign that God is with us. The actual name of their son is Maher-shalal-hash-bash. Do you know what that means? “Quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil.” It is talking about Assyria, and they are coming down, and they are going to take out Syria, and they are going to take out Samaria, and your problems are gone, so to speak. Christmas by any other name in 735 B.C. is Maher-Shalal-hash-bash, “Quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil.”

What is this all about? What does this mean to the original audience? It simply means this: in shaky times, Ahaz, the twenty-year-old king, you have two choices. You can trust in human power, wisdom, ingenuity, human methods, human tools, resources, anything human. You can trust in them for deliverance, for salvation, for satisfaction. You can trust them, or you can trust the promises of God which are written in all the names of the children in this text. That is what is so mind-boggling about the text. God is so subversive. God works in ways we would never dream of. Do you know what Isaiah’s first son, Shear Jashub, do you know what that name means? “A remnant will return.” Do you know what the birth is called? Emmanuel, which means, “God with us,” and you know what Maher-shalal-hash-bash means. Yes, you do now know what it means: “Quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil.” God’s pattern, God’s sign is, do not trust all the human strength, all the human wisdom. Trust his way, and what is his way? From the very, very beginning, as you and I sinned in our parents, Adam and Eve, and they were being escorted out of the garden, do you recall what the last thing God says to us is as we enter the now-fallen world? He says, “Hold on. From the offspring of a woman will come one who will crush the serpent’s head. It will be through a child, the child.”

Is the strobe light going on? Paul, you have to fix this stuff when it happens. Yeah. It is like it is in the window back there. I thought someone was, man, sorry, it has been one of those mornings. That is what the sign. Thank you. Thanks, Josh. That is what the sign meant 2700 years ago. It meant you have a choice, human strength, human wisdom, or God’s promise, which no one but He could ever think of, and it has to do with the child.

Now, what does the sign mean today? How should we bring that sign into this age, and what does it mean for our lives? So, seven-hundred years later, when Jesus is born, thirty to forty years after Jesus lived, Matthew, one of his twelve disciples, decides to write a life story of Jesus. Matthew, it seems, scholars think he is reading the Old Testament, but he is reading it in Greek. There was a Greek translation from the Hebrew called the Septuagint. You have heard of that in your history classes, and in the Septuagint there is a mysterious translation of Isaiah 7, verse 14, where it says, “a virgin will conceive.”

What is interesting is that the Greek word for virgin is, “parthenos.” It is, “parthenos,” and it can mean nothing else except a virgin. It is the strict meaning. It is, “a virgin will conceive.” I mean, if Ahaz had heard that originally, he would have been like so shocked, like, “God, what are you talking about?” and Isaiah did not say that it was a virgin birth, but now, there is no question about it. Matthew said, “What happened when this child was born, when Jesus Christ was born, is that He was born of a virgin.” Now we are talking about something beyond Z, off the charts, a miracle, that Jesus came to us through a virgin birth, born of a woman, but conceived by God. This was the vehicle God chose to bring to us the child, the savior of the world. Now I know at Christmas we get all full of nostalgia and sentiment and the baby and holding it close. Make no mistake about what is being said here as Matthew goes back and grabs Isaiah 7:14 and brings it into this age and chooses not *alma*, but to use *parthenos*, a virgin. Make no mistake what he means. He means that that baby we are holding close to our chest, in our hands, ruled the world from the womb. It is God, fully God and fully man. It is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Make no mistake, this is the Lord. The Son of the Almighty is who this child is.

No one in our time has put it better than one of the most preeminent theologians of our time. N.T. Wright, and he once described it this way. I have never forgotten it: “How can you cope with the end of the world and the beginning of another one? How can you put an earthquake into a test tube or the sea into a bottle? How can you live with the terrifying thought that the hurricane has become human, that fire has become flesh, that life itself came to life and walked in our midst? Christianity either means that, or it means nothing. It is either the most devastating disclosure of the deepest reality in the world, or it is a sham. It is nonsense, a bit of deceitful play acting. Most of us, unable to cope with saying either of those things, condemn ourselves to live in the shadow world in between. We may not be content there, but we do not know how to escape. The virgin birth is how the child comes to us, fully God, so that He has the quality in Himself and in his blood to pay for the sins of the world and whoever believes, but yet being man, can make himself killable, and voluntarily lay down his life to save us.” Fully God and fully man, that is the sign. God with us, God.

Now the early church, our brothers and sisters, from day one believed that Jesus was God. You go to verses like John chapter one, verse 14: “The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth,” and then we go to verse 18, a spectacular statement: “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is Himself God and is in the closest relationship with the Father,” and this is how the literal translation would be, “has put Him into words.” “The word,” but God is in the word, because He is God.

Then we go to a place, the first Christmas carol sung in the history of the church is in Philippians 2, where we read “who,” Jesus, “being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage. Rather, He made Himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant. Being made in human likeness, and being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death of a cross,” so there is no question as you read the New Testament that the early church thought that it was God with us, and you know what else? Jesus claimed that too. If you read the gospels, especially in all of Jesus and the things He taught, it is astonishing. Folks, it is astonishing how much He talked about Himself, and in the mouth of anyone else, we would write him off, as C.S. Lewis said, as a liar, or, “a lunatic on the level of a man who thinks he is a poached egg,” or the Lord.

I mean, the things He said, like, “Are you hungry for significance? Do you need meaning and purpose in your life? I am the bread of life. If you eat of me, you will never be hungry again. I am the living water. If you drink of me, you will never be thirsty again.” Who would say that? “Do you need guidance in your life? Are you not sure where to turn? I am the Good Shepherd. Trust in me. I will guide you. Are you scared to die? Huh? I am the resurrection and the life. The one who lives, believing in me, even though they die, will live.” Who says that? Jesus said that, and then He backed it up with his intelligence. He was able to play on the energy-matter equation and take the properties of water and turn them into wine. He was able to do the same with a young boy’s lunch of two fish and five loaves of bread and feed a crowd of over ten thousand people. He was able to speak to a raging storm on the Sea of Galilee, and the storm obeyed his voice. He was able to take sick cells in diseased people and make them whole. He was able to take dead cells and raise them to life again. The early church wrote about Him that He was the uncreated creator, who made everything and all that is, and even now, Colossians 1:17, He is holding it together, and the New Testament tells us it is Jesus who is the director of history, preparing it for his intended future and our role in it. Folks, do you think that because this sign, this God with us, is so smart, do you think that He might be able to help you and guide your life? We see the sign. We see the Son.

God with us, and not only is He intelligent, God with us, but also is He strong. I want you to think for just a moment of the strongest forces in nature. Near the top of the list, the strongest thing in nature would be water. Think of how dangerous water is, drought, famine, blizzard, avalanche, wind, wave, storm, tornadoes, and water damage. I mean, seven tenths of the surface of the planet is water. What else is mostly water? Your body and mind, and when the water goes out of our body, we are left with ashes. Does Jesus have anything to say to our intended and expected destination of ashes? “I am the resurrection and the life. If you live believing in me, you will live, even though you die.” Folks, how strong is Jesus? Are you with me here? He came in through a door, a virgin birth marked “no entrance,” and He left through a door called, “no exit,” a resurrection from the dead. Do you not think that He has something to say about your impending death and that He can lead you home? See the sign. See the Son, God with us.

So, how do we respond to this sign in our time and in our age? Two things. Really quickly, two things. One, make up your mind about Christmas. What are we celebrating? What is this idea of Christmas all about? Okay, let’s go back to 735 B.C. Two men are standing at that eight-word description, the longest in the Hebrew Bible, at the upper aqueduct, at the end of the washerman’s field road. One of those men, Isaiah, believes that God dwells in a space about the size of this room, and He wants to meet people there, and He has raised up a people who will go to all the nations around the world and invite them to come to this space and know the true and living God. He believes it so, so much that he actually named his kids for it: “The remnant returns,” “God with us,” “Quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil.” Everything in his life revolves around this promise, and the other man, Ahaz, the twenty-year-old king, he makes different choices.

As the story goes on with Ahaz, we are told that he decides to broker a deal with the king of Assyria to use politics as the way out. He ends up selling all the furniture of the temple to pay off the Assyrian king for protection, something that the Assyrian king said he would do, but here is how it ends: “In his time of trouble, King Ahaz became even more unfaithful to the Lord. He offered sacrifices to the gods of Damascus, who had defeated him, for he thought, ‘Since the gods of the King of Aram have helped them,

I will sacrifice to them, so they will help me,” and here it is, the ending: “but they were his downfall, and the downfall of all Israel.”

What about you? Earlier, when we were talking about the crux of the matter, we had that really cryptic verse, “If you do not stand in faith, you will not stand at all.” In the Hebrew, that word, “stand,” is a word you have said, if you have been in church, a hundred times or more. It is the word, “amini.” It is where we get our word, “amen,” which means, “yes,” which means, “I believe it,” which means, “That is the highest allegiance in my heart,” which means, “That is who is going to hold me when I am shaking like a tree in the wind. Whatever I give my “amen,” to is my savior.” Isaiah gave his “amen” to the Lord of hosts. Ahaz gave his “amen” to politics.

What about you? Who has your “amen”? In this world, with a struggling economy, with a broken government, things pressing in from all sides, a war-weary world, a scary world of disasters and divorce and disease and despair, who gets your amen? Will your heart lean on the Lord of hosts, who says, “I know it is hard, but believe me, I have come down. I have come down to be near you”? “God with us,” means that I have become human, and I have experienced everything.” God experienced everything that you are experiencing, apart from sin. God says, “I am with you in the midst of it all, and in the end, I will make all things new.” Will you hold to that promise? Does that get your “amen,” or something else? So, the first thing is, make up your mind about Christmas. What does it mean?

The second thing, if you decide to give your “amen,” to the Lord of hosts, God with us, then get close to Him. Okay, this is so cool. We started in 735 B.C. If you go thirty years ahead, to 705 B.C., you run into this eight-word Google map description again. It is in Isaiah chapter 36. Look at this: “Then the king of Assyria sent his field commander with a large army from Lakish to King Hezekiah,” pause, “King Hezekiah, the son of Ahaz,” King Hezekiah in Jerusalem. Here we go: “When the commander stopped at the,” here it is, “aqueduct of the upper pool on the road to the launderers’ field.” It was a hyperlink. Here we are again, thirty years later, and the king, Hezekiah, has the same choice to make. “Will I trust in human politics or God’s promises?” and this text goes on, the rest of Isaiah 36, to say this, “Hezekiah had faith,” and you know what he does after this? He goes back to the temple, he gets on his knees, and he prays to God. He accesses the power that comes to our knees, and then after he prays, he calls Isaiah to come into the area where he is and says, “Speak God’s voice to me. Tell me what God wants.” Yes, Hezekiah chooses not human politics, but God’s promises, and his language sounds very familiar to us around Christmas. It is the same kind of language that Mary, who gave birth to the savior of the world, said. When the angel told her, “The Spirit will conceive this child in you, and you will give birth to the son,” Mary said, “That’s impossible,” and the angel said, “with God, all things are possible, and Mary said, “I am the Lord’s servant.” Hezekiah said it, and Mary said it, complete surrender.

Folks, Christianity gets billed as a lot of things. Some see it as joining a wellness club, where when you have the time, you invest some in it, and hopefully it makes your life better. Some see it as a gym membership. If you work hard on it, it will make you a better person. Scripture tells us God says that a journey with God is not negotiable. A journey with God is surrender. When God says, “Obey this,” even though we do not want to, we obey. When things come into our life, and we do not understand, God says, “Trust me.” How in the world can we obey? How in the world can we trust God? The credibility comes by seeing what God did to get near to us. Do you know what he did? God surrendered.

He surrendered Himself to the womb. He surrendered Himself to all the conditions of human life as a man apart from sin, every other condition. He surrendered Himself to death, even death on a cross, so that He could be close to us. If I know and you know that He did that for us, then we can trust Him and surrender everything to Him.

As we close today, before our last song, we are going to pray a Christmas prayer and align our hearts with the Emmanuel sign. It is a prayer from A.D. 100, one of the earliest known prayers in the Christian church called the Tadeo. Let's pray, and let's acknowledge the Emmanuel sign in our own hearts. Let's pray.

We praise Thee, O God. We acknowledge Thee to be the Lord. All the earth does worship Thee, the Father everlasting. To Thee all the angels cry aloud, the heavens and all the powers therein. To Thee cherubim and seraphim continually do cry, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts." Heaven and Earth are full of the majesty of thy glory. The glorious company of the apostles praise Thee. The goodly fellowship of the prophets praise Thee. The noble army of martyrs praise Thee. The holy church throughout the world acknowledges Thee, the Father of an infinite majesty, thine honorable, true, and only Son, and also the Holy Ghost, our comforter. Thou art the king of glory, O Christ. Thou art the everlasting Son of the Father. When Thou took us upon Thee, to deliver man, Thou didst not abhor the virgin's womb. When Thou hadst overcome the sharpness of death, Thou didst open the kingdom of heaven to all who believe. Thou sit now at the right hand of God, in the glory of the Father. We believe, and we therefore pray Thee, help thy servants, whom Thou hast redeemed with thy precious blood. Make us to advance thy kingdom, numbered with the saints, in glory everlasting, amen.

40:17 minutes