



Central
Peninsula
Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

The Difference "God With Us" Makes

Isaiah 7:13–14

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series: What Child is This?

Good morning and Merry Christmas! How has your week been? Was it good? Was it hard? Did you have fun or were you stressed out? Most of us move through the Christmas season and into the New Year with a mixture of the good, the hard, the fun and the stressful. Life usually comes at us that way as well; it's a mixture.

Stress is almost always a part of our lives. I usually know what's causing me stress by what wakes me up at 1:00 in the morning. It's the thing I can't get out of my head, the reruns I keep playing in my mind. All of us know what it's like to live with nagging concern and gnawing worry that deprives us of sleep and peace. Then there are also those times when circumstances pound at us with both fists. Our worst fears are realized. Life pummels us and we're shaken to the core.

About 30 years ago we moved here from Denver just before Christmas. Although the Bay Area was home to us, Foster City and CPC were new. Our second daughter was born just after we moved. After renting for a year we scraped together a down payment to buy our own home. It was a good time for us but it was a stressful time—new job, new home, new baby, big house payment.

Then one day, just after Christmas, I was teaching a class when I got news that my 63-year-old mother collapsed and died of a heart attack. Within an hour I stood with my dad beside her lifeless body and we cried. My own grief was compounded by my father's progressing alcoholism.

A couple of months later I was out mowing my lawn when I inadvertently reached down to move something out of the way. I came just a little too close to the mower blade and chopped off the end of my finger. It certainly could have been worse, but it was kind of the straw that broke the camel's back for me. A new home, a new job, a new baby, the loss of my mom, and now a mangled finger. Not a fun time.

I know I'm not alone in facing this level of stress. Many of you have been through even more. You've stood at the graveside of a wife or husband, perhaps even a son or daughter. Some of you have lost your job and perhaps your home. Some of you just live with the everyday stress of a debilitating illness or a difficult marriage. We all live with everyday stresses, but times come for all of us when the load becomes too great. And Christmas doesn't exempt us from experiencing any of those things. What do we do in those times? How do we make it?

During the next two Sundays and on Christmas Eve we're going to be looking at the question, What Child is this? Why is this Child—the Child that we celebrate every Christmas—so special? And why does he make a difference in our darkest times? Four million babies enter the world in the United States in one year, and we're singing about one Child born over two thousand years ago, far away in the Middle East. Why does this one Child make such a difference in our lives?

Ahaz's Stressful Situation

In order to answer those questions I want to take you back to an obscure story buried in a part of the Bible many of us never get around to reading. In Isaiah 7 we see a case study in how one man handled major stress in his life. His name was Ahaz. He was the King of Judah, which was a small kingdom of just two Israelite tribes—Judah and Benjamin. About 200 years earlier ten of the twelve tribes had split off and become a separate nation called Israel, and the two tribes in the South were called Judah. Ahaz became king of Judah around 735 B.C.

After becoming King, Ahaz faced a desperate situation. Two kings, one from Syria, and the other from the northern tribes of Israel, came together to conquer Judah. They marched right up to Jerusalem with the intention of waging war. You can imagine how Ahaz and the people of his tiny kingdom reacted. Verse 2 says they were *"shaken as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind."* That's called major stress. Ahaz is shaking in his royal sandals. The situation seems hopeless.

How do you handle a situation like that? Several years ago some researchers published the results on how people manage stress. They found Americans tend to handle stress in one of three ways. Some of us handle it by trying to change the situation. If you can't make the house payments, sell the house and buy something you can afford. If you can't make the marriage work, move out and perhaps get a divorce. If your job is causing stress, find another one. You do what you have to do to change the situation. The problem is it's not always possible to do that. Some situations are beyond our control. In this case, Ahaz can't change the situation. As we say, it is what it is.

A second way we handle stress is we change the way we feel about the situation; we try to manage our emotions. We convince ourselves we really shouldn't be sad, angry or scared. We deny our feelings and bury them deep enough so we no longer have to deal with them on a conscious level. The problem is it

takes a lot of emotional energy to do that, and the results aren't always good. Those suppressed emotions have a way of leaking out and wreaking havoc in our lives. I don't think Ahaz could change how he felt about this. It was just too close to home.

The third way we cope with major stress, according to these researchers, is by changing the meaning of the situation. What's that all about? How do you do that? This is where the prophet Isaiah comes in.

God's Promise to Ahaz

In verses 3-6 God speaks to Isaiah, giving him a message to deliver to Ahaz. God wants Isaiah to tell Ahaz everything is under control. Isaiah is to say to Ahaz, *"Be careful, keep calm and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood."* It almost sounds as if God is telling Ahaz to somehow change the way he feels about this crisis. "Be careful, be calm, have no fear." Imagine hearing Isaiah say that to you. How would you feel? "Yeah, right. Stay calm. Just relax. We're about to become dust and you tell me to have no fear. Maybe prophets can do that, but not me."

But that's not all God said. In verses 7-9 he tells Ahaz the attack he fears so much simply isn't going to happen. God says, *"I'm the Sovereign Lord and what you fear won't take place."* He says these two kings aren't as powerful as they look. Both these nations you fear are led by mere men; smoldering stubs, he calls them. As my coach used to say, "They put their pants on one leg at a time."

We're not told what Ahaz did as a result of those words, but from what comes next it appears he was having a hard time believing what God was saying because look what God says next, *"Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, 'Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.'"* It's pretty clear Ahaz was having a hard time believing the Lord's message. But the Lord was patient with Ahaz, and encourages him to ask for whatever sign he wants to prove the message is true. Have you ever asked for a sign from God? "God just show me you're for real. Give me a sign and I'll believe you."

Look how Ahaz responds, *"But Ahaz said, 'I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test'"* (v. 12). That sounds so spiritual. But sometimes we talk like that to mask what's really unbelief. To ask for a sign wasn't testing the Lord because the Lord invited him to do it. But Ahaz refused the invitation. It seems to me **that** is testing the Lord! God might have had a lot of patience, but Isaiah was running out of it. You can hear his frustration as Isaiah says to Ahaz in verses 13-14, *"Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."* Isaiah goes on to say that before that child is

old enough to tell the difference between right and wrong, the alliance against Judah will be destroyed.

God says, "Okay, partner. If you won't ask for a sign, you're going to get one anyway. Here is what you'll get: "A virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and you'll call him Immanuel." God's sign to a fear-filled and faithless king was a miracle baby named Immanuel, which means "God with us." Ahaz faced a crisis of massive implications. His stress level was off the charts. He couldn't change the situation. He couldn't change how he felt about the situation. But God offered him a sign that would change the meaning of the situation: God with us. God is not absent. God is here—Immanuel.

What difference would that make for Ahaz? Two powerful kings were knocking on the door of Jerusalem. The Lord says they're just men; they're nothing to worry about. He changes the meaning of the situation. He says, "Here's a miracle. God is with you. God is with us. What more do you need to get things in perspective?"

You and I can't always change our situations, but Immanuel makes it possible to change the meaning of our situation, any situation. A central truth of the Bible is God is sovereign. He created the heavens and the earth and he still holds it all together. He has a plan for history, and his plan extends even to the details of our lives. He's the Almighty God. But he's also the God who comes to us in weakness and vulnerability. God with us. He understands our brokenness because he entered into all of it. Knowing that can change the meaning of even our greatest stresses.

In his book *Unspeakable*, Os Guinness tells a story about a well-known Christian leader whose son was killed in a cycling accident. Although the leader was devastated, somehow he managed to suppress his grief, even preaching at his son's funeral. His display of hope in the midst of tragedy earned him the admiration of many.

But a few weeks after the funeral, he invited Guinness and a few friends to his home. According to Guinness, this man spoke and even screamed "not with the hope of a preacher," Guinness writes, "but with the hurt of a father, pained and furious at God, dark and bilious in his blasphemy." In his agony, he blamed God for his son's death.

Rather than rebuke him, one of Guinness's friends gently reminded the enraged father of the story of Jesus at Lazarus' tomb. On three occasions in that story, in the presence of death, Jesus expressed anger, and even furious indignation. When Immanuel came to earth, he became a human being just like us, feeling the abnormality of our suffering. The beautiful world God created is now broken and in ruins. Jesus came to heal this broken world and our broken lives, but first, he came to earth as Immanuel to identify with our anguish.

That changes the meaning of our suffering. It frees us to face the world's brokenness just as Jesus did. We're free to feel what is human to feel: sorrow at what's heartbreaking, shock at what's shattering, and outrage at what's just out of joint.

Ahaz doesn't really understand all that. But he knew enough to change the meaning of his situation. God told him what to do—stand firm in your faith: "If you don't stand firm in your faith, you won't stand at all." If Ahaz didn't believe, if he didn't trust the promise—God with us—he'd miss the opportunity to change the meaning of his situation.

Most scholars believe there was an immediate fulfillment of this prophecy during Ahaz's life. If you read through Isaiah you'll see there was a child born in the royal house of Ahaz. A woman who was a virgin got married and did conceive a child and they named him Immanuel. He was a symbol of God's presence in those dark times.

The Sign of Immanuel

But, as with many OT prophecies, there was later fulfillment. Fast forward 700 years. In Matthew's Gospel we read of the ultimate fulfillment of this promise made to Ahaz: *"Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet. 'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel!' (which means, God with us)"* (Matt. 1:18-22).

Isn't it fascinating this prediction was given 700 years before the birth of Jesus? When Jesus was born, Matthew says, "This is it. This is the child God spoke to Ahaz about. This is God with us." Don't miss it! Don't miss the sign! The reason we make such a big deal over this child is because the child born in a manger over 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem is Immanuel. This is the God who desired to be present with his people, even in our darkness.

The prophecy was given to Ahaz in a very dark time, in a time where he was afraid his enemies would conquer him and do away with God's people altogether. In that dark time God promised a child who would be a sign that God is with them. Seven hundred years later that prophecy was ultimately fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. Once again, the people were under great stress; it was a dark time. Rome occupied and ruled their land. Israel was oppressed and beaten down. It had been 400 years since they'd heard the voice of a prophet in Israel. Even the religious leaders

had become petty and selfish. What could it mean to a first century Jew that a miracle baby named Immanuel would be born to a virgin 700 years later? How could that change the meaning of their situation?

The apostle John tells us for most of them it didn't. He said of Jesus, *"He came to his own, but his own received him not"* (John 1:18). He came to his own. They knew the stories. They read the Scriptures. They heard the prophecies. They'd memorized Isaiah 7:14. But they didn't receive him. They didn't believe. They didn't stand firm in their faith. They missed the opportunity to change the meaning of their situation.

How about us? We're heading into a New Year. Let's be realistic. There are so many dark things that might happen that could shake us to the core. Another 9-11? A spot on an MRI? The economy back in the tank? Is there a word of hope and promise for **us** just as there was for a faithless king or a faithless people more than 2,000 years ago?

John gives us some hope. He wrote, "He came to his own, but his own received him not." Yet then he added, "But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believed in his name." If you and I believe in his name, this promise is for us—God with us. Don't miss that sign! That can change the meaning of every situation, if you stand in your faith, faith in him, faith in Immanuel. That's still what God requires. When stress nags us, when everything looks dark and hopeless, then faith in Immanuel can make the difference. It may not change the situation, your emotions may still waver, but it does change the meaning of it. No situation is ever the same when you believe God is with you in it.

What Child is This? That is the question. Why is this Child—the Child that we celebrate at Christmas—so special? Because this child born over 2,000 years ago in a little town called Bethlehem is God with us. This is the child who grew to live a life of perfect obedience and then, as the angel said to Joseph, he will save his people from their sins. How would he do that? He'd take all the darkness and all the sin upon himself. When he died on the cross he paid in full the penalty for sin to save us.

Where do you find yourself today? Maybe you're a follower of his but it's a dark time in your life. Maybe you've received a diagnosis and it doesn't look good. The Good News of Jesus is God with us. You can trust him. Stand firm in your faith. He's the One who said, "He who believes in me will live even though he dies."

Or maybe you feel like you're in darkness because of something someone has done to you—cheated you, betrayed you, abandoned you. Because of what's been done to you, there's a cloud of darkness over you. The Good News of the gospel is Jesus is God with us. Stand firm in your faith. You can put your trust in him regardless of the situation you're in today.

You may be a follower of Christ but you feel like you're in darkness because of your own doing. You've made choices and you're suffering the consequences. The Bible promises, "If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Whatever you've done, Immanuel is always there to cleanse and forgive, so stand firm in your faith.

There's another group of people in here. Maybe you're not a follower of Christ. You've never really put your trust in him. You're like Ahaz who rejected what God was saying. You just have never really believed the promise that God is with us in the person of Jesus. It's never too late to trust in Christ; to say, "Yes, he's God with us. Yes, he came to save me from sin and death. Yes, I want him in my life."

Would you bow your heads with me. If you're not confident you're a child of God based on your faith that this child we

celebrate at Christmas is indeed God with us who came to save us from our sins, and if you'd like to pray a simple prayer to receive him into your life, then would you just raise your hand... Let me lead you in praying this prayer:

Jesus, I believe you are God with us, the Son of God, and that you died on the cross to rescue me from sin and death and to restore me to the Father. I choose now to turn from my sins, my self-centeredness, and every part of my life that doesn't please you. I choose you. I receive your forgiveness and ask you to take your rightful place in my life as my Savior and Lord. Come rule in my heart and fill me with your love. Thank you, God. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.