

God's Sign (Isaiah 7: 2-4, 10-16)

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'Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel' (Isa. 7: 14) – that is 'God with us'. When St Jerome in the 5th century designated the prophet Isaiah as an evangelist and the book of Isaiah as the fifth gospel, this passage must have been one of the keys to his argument. Many mediaeval and renaissance depictions of the Annunciation include the presence of Isaiah bearing a scroll inscribed with these words, and for much of the Christian tradition, this is overwhelmingly the verse with which the prophet was associated.¹

And yet, Handel's *Messiah* and the treasures of European religious art notwithstanding, the idea that Isaiah had foreknowledge of Jesus' birth is entirely anachronistic. In these words, he's speaking to his own time nine centuries earlier and to the crisis facing Ahaz, king of Judah. Even so, I want to suggest that the notion of God's sign in the birth of a child speaks to the radical meaning of Christmas, in ways that may still illuminate faith in a troubled world.

Let's start though with Isaiah's context. This section of the book of Isaiah is concerned with the threat facing Jerusalem and its monarchy during the 8th century BCE. In this passage, the threat emanates from Judah's two small northern neighbours, Israel (called Ephraim) and Syria (called Aram). King Ahaz, we're told, is inspecting the city waterworks, likely in anticipation of a siege, and his heart and the heart of his people is shaking, the text says, 'as the trees of the forest shake before the wind' (Isa. 7: 2). So much so, apparently, that Ahaz is contemplating appealing to the powerful and notoriously ruthless empire of Assyria for military help.

Isaiah is therefore sent by God to meet the frightened king. He takes with him his own son, whose name is given as Shear-jashub, which means 'a remnant shall

¹ John F. Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1996), pp.66-67.

return'. In the context, this is rather unsettling. Although it might seem at first glance comforting, such a phrase presupposes (as Walter Brueggemann points out) that there will be need to make a return. 'It alludes to the conviction of the Isaiah tradition that Jerusalem will be destroyed and its inhabitants will be deported into exile, which is tantamount to death. And from the death of exile only a small portion of the population will eventually be returned to Jerusalem to resume life'.² In other words, 'the presence of the little boy along with the prophet and the king adds to the gravity of the exchange. The name of the boy puts the king on notice'.³

Despite this ominous note, however, Ahaz is urged by the prophet not to fear the immediate threat: 'Take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart faint because of these two smouldering stumps of firebrands' (Isa. 7: 4). Isaiah knows that the much greater threat lies in seeking to rely on the Assyrian superpower. So he urges the king not to put his trust in such an alliance, but in the promise of the Lord, and invites Ahaz to ask for a sign that will help him make this act of trust. But the king replies with pious avoidance: 'I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test' (Isa. 7: 12). An exasperated Isaiah responds: 'Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? (Isa. 7: 13)' All right then, even if you won't ask, 'the Lord himself will give you a sign'. And this is it: 'Look, a young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel' (Isa. 7: 14).

After more than two thousand years of Christian reading, it's hard for us not to hear this as referring to the virgin birth. From Isaiah's point of view, however, the sign's crucial element concerns not the birth itself but the child, whose name means 'God with us'. Only a few verses earlier, there's been mention of a child with an ominous name – 'a remnant shall return'. Here though is promised a child whose birth signifies 'reassurance of the core conviction ... that God is present in and with and for Israel as defender, guardian, and protector, so that Israel need not be afraid'.⁴ Brueggemann points out that there's no sense this child will himself become

² Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), p.65.

³ Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, p.65.

⁴ Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, p.70.

a king, or Israel's rescuer. The function of the child seems simply to bear this name and to be a marker of the timeframe of the current threat – a time that will be short indeed. 'For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good [conventionally reckoned to be about 2 years], the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted' (Isa. 7: 16).⁵ In other words – this too will pass. But Ahaz can't believe it. Isaiah issues an invitation to have faith in the promise of God to 'be with' him. But the king cannot make the transition from panic to trust, from fear to faith. He seeks his security in Assyria instead and, as the book of Isaiah interprets subsequent events, the results are disastrous.

Well, at one level it's all pretty obscure. But here's what's struck me this week. I think of Ahaz, aware of armies massing against his city, his dread of being under siege with who knows what suffering to come – that incredible image of the people's hearts shaking 'as the trees of the forest shake before the wind', impotently awaiting the breaking of the storm. And then I think of what the prophet offers as a sign that all will be well – the birth of a child with a reassuring name, to an unknown woman at an unknown time. And *that's* what he's supposed to trust? *That's* God's response? It seems utterly, absurdly, laughably inadequate to the situation; it's a ground for trust that looks like no ground at all.

And for me, perhaps this year particularly, that's what Christmas feels like too. Our country is on fire. Many of our political leaders seem impotent and afraid, as we all reap the harvest of their criminal negligence, vacillation, foolishness and corruption. We do not know what is to come. It is possible that the climate tipping point has already been reached, and we are at the beginning of the end of life as we have known it, a descent into what 11, 000 scientists earlier this year described as 'untold suffering' on planet earth. And we are asked to believe that a child born for us over 2000 years ago, a child named 'God with us', is grounds for trust, is light in this darkness, offers a way for us to follow. It seems utterly, absurdly, laughably inadequate to the situation.

⁵ Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, p.71.

And yet ... how else do we expect God to show up? A god who invades, overpowers, takes matters into god's hands when we stuff it up, is ultimately a tyrant – even if it's apparently for our own good. The whole pedagogy of our tradition is trying to wean us from this false sacred image of god. The only God that's not a projection of infantile fantasy, the only God who is real is discovered in brokenness, vulnerability and prayer. And this God is present, this God acts, only ever from the *within* of things, seeking our consent, inviting our participation, as God acted within and through Isaiah and Mary and Jesus.

The question for us – for me – this Christmas is whether I dare keep faith with this promised presence, this almost unbearable vulnerability. In the midst of disaster, am I willing to keep listening for a wisdom beyond my own; to remain receptive to a love that transforms even in and through death? Can I 'take heart' and refuse to despair? Keeping faith in this way is not a guarantee of rescue. It does not remove one iota of our responsibility for engaging the crisis of our time, or imply that we must not do everything in our power to avert catastrophe, speak the truth, act wisely and with urgency. It means simply that in the midst of it all, we commit to remaining ourselves broken open to God, looking to join in God's eternally giving life, because Christmas means that no matter what befalls, God is, God is with us and love abides. Dare I believe this? Dare we?

Isaiah said to Ahaz: 'If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all' (Isa. 7: 9). This Christmas, then, as we too tremble 'as the trees of the forest shake before the wind', I pray that may we discover the strength in our vulnerability, practise this courage and trust, and so be with God as God promises to be with us.