

*Sermon for 4 Advent, Year A
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Holy Nativity, Plano
23 December, 2007*

The touchstone of today's readings is found in the letter of St. Paul to the Romans. St. Paul speaks of the good news of God which was foretold by the prophets in the scripture, the good news of Jesus the Messiah, "who was descended from David according to the flesh", but showed himself to be the true Son of God by his resurrection. But then Paul turns to his own purpose in the will of God. He is sent "to bring about the obedience of faith". There it is. Not obedience that doesn't come from faith. Not faith without obedience. The obedience of faith. These two things are so intertwined that it's difficult to determine where the one ends and the other begins. We are to trust God so much that we become obedient. And we are to be obedient out of faithfulness to the one who is trustworthy.

Our Old Testament and Gospel readings give us contrasting examples of the need for the obedience of faith, one negative and one positive. And they do it in the context of the good news about Jesus the Messiah. The reason they come together in the lectionary is that St. Matthew actually quotes the prophet Isaiah. So the two passages are obviously linked. But by looking at them in the light of Paul's phrase, the obedience of faith, we can also see how God is working out his purposes on the great canvas of history, working through people whether they like it or not, whether they even acknowledge him or not.

So let's take the passage from Isaiah. We are dealing with a historical conversation between the prophet, who is speaking for God, and the king of Judah, Ahaz. Remember that Israel is divided into two kingdoms at this point. Don't get Ahaz confused with Ahab, who was an earlier king of the Northern Kingdom. Ahaz is ruler of the southern kingdom of Judah. He is of the house of David. But he is not a true heir of King David.

The context is this: The great empire of the Assyrians is about to turn its attention to its southwestern neighbors. That would include Philistia, Edom, Syria, Israel, and Judah on the way to Egypt, which is the big prize. So of course the little countries turn on each other. Each of them is trying to get as much power as possible in order to withstand the onslaught of Assyria. In the meantime, Judah is in deep trouble. All of those other little principalities are eating away at its borders, raiding its land and carrying away people. Judah is the small fish about to be eaten by the medium-sized fish before the big fish shows up.

Syria and Israel form an alliance to take over Judah and destroy the dynasty of David. The armies are actually on their way to besiege Jerusalem, the capital of Judah. It is the end of the road, and King Ahaz has come up with a desperate plan.

The plan is to ask *Assyria*, the big fish, to save him from Syria and Israel, the medium-size fish. The idea is that if he makes friends with Assyria right off the bat, maybe he can survive the current attack and then not be slated for demolition by the Assyrian eminent domain machine.

In the middle of all this, Isaiah is sent by God to King Ahaz. And here's the message: Don't worry about it! This whole attack that you're so worried about isn't going to happen. *But* ... "if you will not believe, surely you shall not be established." It's a message of hope, but it's also a warning. The question is: who are you going to trust? The blood-thirsty Assyrians, with their pagan idols? Or the one who created everything from nothing and showed his love for you by bringing you out of Egypt into the land of promise? You must choose, so choose wisely!

And this is where we jump into the story with our reading. God not only poses the question, he even prompts Ahaz to ask for a sign. God isn't out to get anyone. If you're just trying to be a good king and you're confused, that's OK. If you are trying to be faithful and you need to be sure how to be obedient, then we can make it happen. Ask for a sign. Make it absolutely anything! I'll do it. And then you'll be clear about what I'm asking of you.

But no. Ahaz doesn't want that kind of clarity. He's into all the latest idolatrous fads, new gods from the surrounding countries, and the latest liturgical fashions. He doesn't want to be locked in to one God who makes demands. He doesn't have faith that God can do what he says, and he doesn't want a sign that will prove him wrong.

This isn't the obedience of faith. It's the disobedience of intentional distrust. But of course Ahaz is a good politician, even if he stinks as a king. So he cloaks his answer in pious terms, even while his decision not to trust God is blasphemous. "I will not put the Lord to the test." But he just told you to, idiot! Rather than obeying God, Ahaz is using scripture to justify what he himself wants to do.

But God's response is to launch into this passage that is quoted by Matthew over 750 years later. Fine, God says, you won't ask for a sign? I'll give you one anyway. "Behold, a *maiden* shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." And before that child reaches the age of accountability, Syria and Israel will be destroyed. And then Assyria is coming after you!

Now a maiden is a young woman of marriageable age. It would have been assumed that such a young woman was a virgin until she was married, which is why the Greek Old Testament uses the word for "virgin" to translate this Hebrew word. But it seems there must have been two different fulfillments of this prophecy. We're not told about the sign that Ahaz eventually received. There must have been a boy who was born shortly after the prophecy, who fulfilled the part about Syria and Israel. But we also know that some seven centuries later,

another descendent of David *was* born of a virgin. And St. Matthew sees that as yet another fulfillment of this prophecy given to Ahaz.

So out of the faithlessness and rebelliousness of the house of David, we are catapulted 700 years and one Bible translation forward to our second example. And here another man of the line of David is now a simple contractor rather than a king. And yet he behaves like a king should. When he finds that his betrothed is with child, and not by him, he decides to keep it quiet. He doesn't want to shame her, but he cannot now marry her, he thinks. But then Joseph, who is a dreaming prophet like his namesake, hears from God. "Do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit".

And here we have the same question that was posed to King Ahaz over 700 years ago. Who do you trust? What Joseph is being asked to do (at least in the eyes of the world) is to take a confirmed harlot as his wife. We who live in the Babylon of twenty-first century America cannot possibly understand the shame and humiliation that would entail to a faithful Jewish man in Nazareth two thousand years ago. But try to imagine it. And then try to imagine staking your entire life on the belief that God spoke to you in a dream.

Ahaz just had to have enough faith to ask for a sign, so that God could build his faith even more. Joseph had to get married. Ahaz wouldn't give up his desperate plan in order to trust God even a little bit. Joseph laid down all of his plans and hopes and dreams to care for the woman and her child, who "will save his people from their sins." And he did it at the drop of a hat. Have a dream, wake up, do what God told you in the dream. Very, very simple. Very, very difficult. The obedience of faith.

But the reason Joseph could have such faith was because he paid attention to the true protagonist of the story. Joseph knows his scripture, and therefore he knows his God. And to truly know God is to trust him. This is a God who takes the disobedience of the house of David and says, "OK. I can work with this." And then he takes the Assyrians, and the Babylonians, and the exile, and the Persians, and the restoration under Ezra and Nehemiah, and the Greeks under Alexander, and the Maccabees, and Herod, and the Roman Empire itself, and all the little details that don't even make it into the history books. And he weaves it all together over hundreds and thousands of years, the faithful and the unfaithful, the obedient and the disobedient, and he comes up with what is best for each and every person who lives through any part of it. And eventually it comes out as a solution to the deepest problem we have. That's why Joseph is obedient. Because he knows and trusts the God who does all that.

And the only question left for us is the same one posed to these two men. Who do you trust? We're sitting on even more of the story than Joseph had. It's the greatest story in the world, what God has done in it. Are we going to trust the

God who gives us salvation? Are we willing to drop our plans for his? Or are we going to be like Ahaz, handing over our future to our worst enemy, because we don't trust the one who saves.