

# Fourth Sunday in Advent

## WHICH IMMANUEL? TO JUDGE OR TO SAVE?

Isaiah 7:10-17

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

10Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, 11Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. 12But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. 13Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? 14Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. 15He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. 16For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

17The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria."

*Exegetical note: Biblical scholars note the difficulty in translating this particular text of Isaiah. To get a probing and concise discussion on that difficulty see Ralph Klein's commentary*

at <http://fontes.lstc.edu/~rklein/Documents/adventa.htm#Advent4>.

*The debate is over whether Immanuel means that "God is with us" to judge or to save. If we agree with Klein that the "original meaning" in Isaiah means "to judge," such agreement does not preclude the possibility that we might also believe that God can find a way to overrule his judgment of us, even in Isaia h.*

*Klein refers to Isaiah 8:9-10 as a case in point, but Isaiah's whole focus on God's desire to deliver Israel from God's own imposed exile/judgment amounts to the same. That dynamic deliverance is what "God with us" in Jesus is all about, and it informs Matthew's "eschatological" (Klein's term) interpretation of the text. This deliverance is even bigger than what Isaiah had foreseen. God's imposed exile is on the whole world; and it is described as God's people being condemned to live with the consequence of their sin, which is no life at all. God's counter work of deliverance is "God with us" in Jesus; and it is described as his taking upon himself the sins of the world to create a new life for us with God.*

---

## **DIAGNOSIS: Immanuel , God with Us to Judge**

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : *Presumption Piety: "I will not put the Lord to the test" (v. 12).*

Ahaz, King of Judah (the Southern Kingdom), is between a rock and a hard spot. The politics of the day (the Syro-Ephramite War of 734-732 BCE) leaves no clear options for securing the nation. As Klein notes, both Israel (the Northern Kingdom) and Aram/Syria are pressuring him (on pains of invasion and destruction) to side with them against the mighty Assyrians. Ahaz, on the other hand, wanted to pay tribute to Assyria in hopes of maintaining the security or "the good" (cf. vv. 15-16) of the nation. Isaiah represents the word of God, counseling neutrality at this time. According to that word, Ahaz is not to be afraid of the two invading kings, but is to trust that God has their good in mind. Indeed, God is even eager to give him a "sign" of that good intention in this time of crisis. But, unfortunately, we never get a glimpse at what that sign might be because Ahaz refuses both the prophetic word and the invitation to ask for a sign of its truth. Why does Ahaz refuse? It would

seem, at first glance, that his piety wouldn't allow it: "I will not put the Lord to the test" (v. 12). How often might our own piety get in the way of God's word and his offer to give us signs of his trustworthiness?

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) :** *Presumptuous Heart: "I will not ask" (v. 12)*

The text makes it clear that Ahaz' pious retort to Isaiah is not a statement of faith in God. Indeed, he is using pious religious language to conceal his lack of trust in God. In a word, he has chosen "evil" (cf. vv. 15-16); he has placed himself in opposition to God. To refuse to ask anything of God is to refuse to hear what God really has to say; and to refuse to hear what God has to say is to set one's heart against God; and to set one's heart against God is to choose evil. Rather than God's word, Ahaz's heart is predisposed to making the right political alliance. His ultimate trust is in Assyria—although the better word for Ahaz's inner disposition in this case is "fear."

**Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) :** *God against All Presumptuousness: "The Lord himself will give you a sign" (v. 14)*

Whether or not Ahaz will ask for a sign, Isaiah tells us that "the Lord himself will give [Ahaz] a sign." But this sign will now reveal what God thinks of Ahaz's presumptuousness. That young maiden you see pregnant, she is carrying your replacement! He is "Immanuel" (v. 14), alright, God with you, but God with you to judge you, to bring you to an end. And this nation you so desperately want to keep for yourself, it too will feel my judgment. And yes, Assyria (v. 17), that haughty, mighty Assyria (cf. Isa. 10:5-12); it may be evil, but right now it will also be my "good" instrument to punish and judge: first upon Israel and Aram/Syria, but also on you. But note, the days of Assyria's usefulness to the Lord (something it has no knowledge of and for which it is no willing compliant) will run out. It too will meet

its demise. Isn't the world we see under judgment (in Judah, Aram, and Assyria) the same world we know today?

## **PROGNOSIS: Immanuel, God with Us to Save**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : God's Bold Sign: Another Sign, Another Child**

Whatever might be said concerning the sign Isaiah gives to Ahaz, this much is certain: The sign was deserved, it was not unique, and, in terms of justice, it was "good." And yet, that sign/word wasn't "good" enough—not for Israel and Judah; nor is it for us, and, thanks be to God, not for the God that Isaiah prophesies for either. For the very same Isaiah who knows the penultimate sign/word of judgment also knows a sign/word of hope, a word of God that subverts God's judgment with mercy and calls that ultimate word "good" too! Moreover, we don't need to wait until Second Isaiah (chapters 40-55) and the Suffering Servant Songs to see this. First Isaiah (chapters 9-12) already has signs aplenty (a returning remnant, a shoot out of the stump of Jesse) of a future, eschatological day when God's judgment will give way to God's mercy and God will be with his people in a new way, to "save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:21), as Matthew describes it. Question is, how long do we wait? Answer: as long as it takes for Jesus to arrive into our lives and into our world. It is no small matter that Matthew (1:23) takes this very text of Isaiah and juxtaposes it to pregnant Mary and fetal Jesus, not as another sign of God's judgment but of God's subversion of that judgment. Matthew, in other words, sees pregnant Mary and fetal Jesus as a "sign of the opposite" of what God was doing in Isaiah 7. Jesus is Immanuel, alright, but Immanuel of a wholly different kind from Isaiah 7; he is God with us to save. At the heart of this subversive work is Jesus crucified and raised: In the death and resurrection of Christ "God is with us" to accept the judgment himself and to save us by it, overruling the very judgment of guilt and sentence of

death that God issued against sinful humanity with the promise of forgiveness of sins and resurrection to new life.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) :** *Our Bold Hearts: "Ask a sign (v. 11) ...and it will be given you" (cf. v. Mt 7:1)*

It is not our piety that connects us to Jesus, who is the sign of God's mercy, but our "asking" (which is, itself, inspired by God, v. 10): we asking Christ to include us in his sign of the cross. That is something that Ahaz was not able to venture. Yet, for those who receive the sign of the cross, that is precisely how they approach life. Such "asking" is not an act of piety but an act of faith, of a bold heart. Asking emerges not out of strength but weakness; asking corresponds not to the world of just desserts but to mercy; asking doesn't "weary God" but allows God to be all in all.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) :** *Bold Politics: Living in the Sign of the Cross: "Knowing how to refuse evil and choose the good" (cf. vv. 15-16)*

We have no idea what kind of political imagination, in that moment of political crisis, God may have shown Ahaz had Ahaz simply asked for a sign, had faith. Might the exile have been averted? Might Judah have escaped the torrents of political history? We have no way of knowing. But that isn't really the point. The point is that the politics God invites Judah and us into, is not a politics of power and might, but a politics of faith in the word of the Lord, a politics of redemption through the sign of the cross. Only from the stand point of faith, and not from our bourgeois, pious value system, does one really "know how to refuse the evil and choose the good." (The choice of Bonhoeffer is a case in point.) Perhaps the question we should ask today is: Is a politics of the cross possible? What might such a politics look like? Dare we even "ask" for a sign? Indeed we should! Such asking may be too bold a politics for

some, but not for those who trust the sign of the cross.