

one reason, why we pray for our government.). Back to King Ahaz: not only did he sacrifice his own children; he let many in Judea to do the same. There are conflicting ideas about what "to pass through the fire" means, precisely, but the result of the ceremony was that child would die as a "peace sacrifice" so that the gods were appeased. The false god Molech would be satisfied for a little while by the death of a child. This practice was prohibited in Leviticus 18:21:

Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molech, for you must not profane the name of your God. I am the LORD.

Let's quickly read Leviticus 20:3-5.

I will set my face against that man and I will cut him off from his people; for by giving his children to Molech, he has defiled my sanctuary and profaned my holy name. If the people of the community close their eyes when that man gives one of his children to Molech and they fail to put him to death, I will set my face against that man and his family and will cut off from their people both him and all who follow him in prostituting themselves to Molech.

So when you know the character of King Ahaz (2Kings 16:2), you know that we're dealing with an evil king.

As we read this story, we should realise that the Assyrian Empire, which was one of the superpowers of that day in the region, was 'up and coming.' Egypt's day had come and gone, though it was still influential, at least at the beginning of this period. Assyria was increasing in its world influence and world power.

Syria (not the same as Assyria) and the northern Kingdom of Israel formed a coalition and attempted to force Judea to join them, in order to oppose the onslaught and the growing power of the Assyrians. They made a proposition to King Ahaz, but King Ahaz wavered. Should he accept an alliance with Ephraim and Syria, or should he align himself with Egypt - or even with Assyria? He wavered to and fro; he didn't know whether to join this coalition or not, and because of his hesitation, Syria and Ephraim (that is, the Northern kingdom of Israel) turned against him. They decided that they were going to coerce King Ahaz; they were going to punish him for his *lukewarmness*; they were going to depose him; they were going to put another King upon the throne of Judah so that they could have their way. Hearing the news that Syria and Israel were forming an alliance against him, King Ahaz trembled.

At this point, the prophet enters with a message from God. Isaiah the prophet was sent to the King to calm him down, to give him a message of comfort. And we read about this encounter in Isaiah, chapter 7. Despite the fact that Ahaz introduced his people to many idolatrous customs (See Isaiah, 8:19, 38:8, and 2 Kings 23:12.), God is gracious - not only to speak to him, but to the entire nation of Judah - offering him a message of real hope.

The basic message of Isaiah 7 goes something like this: "Now listen here, mate: if you would only trust in God, if you would only put your faith in God, give everything into His hands, then you would be all right, mate, and God will look after you and the people of Judah, the people you rule. God will take care of you and your throne."

Then Isaiah commanded King Ahaz to actually test God. "Tempting" or testing God is forbidden in Deuteronomy 6:16, "Do not tempt the Lord your God." But in this instance, God Himself told Ahaz to ask for a sign. If God Himself asks you to ask Him for a sign, then, to obey Him is not tempting God. It is, in fact, testing God's patience *not* to seek a sign. Ahaz displays false humility at this point by refusing to ask God for a sign. We should mention that God had already given other signs. King Ahaz, and the nation had already received many signs, such as the warnings from the past and present prophets. The instruction to Ahaz to seek a sign is not to test God, but to obey God by asking for a sign. God has told Ahaz not to worry about this alliance of Israel and Syria, and God is willing to give a sign to confirm His message.

There were at this time, three significant prophets in the lands of the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah, namely, Isaiah, Hosea and Micah. All three spoke on behalf of God to the King and to the nation. Our king Ahaz, however, in all his pride and in all his stubbornness, refused to seek a sign. He went his own merry way. He trusted in his own wisdom. He decided that it would be better trust politics by making a treaty with another nation - to be exact, by making a treaty with the King of Assyria - only to have that king, Tiglath-Pileser, break that military alliance with Ahaz. As we would say today, he ended up with egg on his face.

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and He will direct your steps," Solomon had said in Proverbs, chapter 3. This 'directing of the steps' was the perception of "Immanuel," "God with us," as presented in Isaiah, chapter 7. Before the time of Isaiah, at one point in the past, "God with us" had meant the Pillar of Fire (the Shekinah). At another time "God with us" had been manifested as the Glory in the Temple. So, to summarise...

1. In the days of the prophets, for God to guide the King was perceived as "God with us." This guidance to the king came in the form of one or two leaders, the Priest and the Prophet.
 - The Priest spoke to God on behalf of the people
 - The Prophet spoke to the king and the people on behalf of God. (In Matthew's gospel, we see Y'shua the king receiving direct guidance from God, without benefit of prophet or priest.)
2. At other times "God with us" guidance was perceived through the Shekinah glory of God or the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire.
 - As in the Exodus
 - In Ezekiel we see the Glory of God leave the Temple; God is no longer with his people. (In John's gospel we see the return of that Glory. He depicts Y'shua as the glory of God.)

Isaiah announced to Ahaz, in verse 14 of chapter 7, what would happen if only he trusted in God, put his faith in God. Isaiah was asking him to cease the attempt to move the nations like pawns on his part of the earth, as if he owned it, and simply trust the One - as we were telling the children this morning - who has the hand that truly moves the world. If he would only trust God, Isaiah was saying, God would send a sign.

In that very hour in which Isaiah was standing before Ahaz, the fate of Jerusalem was decided for more than two thousand years. His failure to ask for a sign, like

Israel's refusing to believe in that same sign many years later – both could have changed history if the Word of the Lord had been accepted.

The sign was an unborn child. This child would be called Immanuel. Perhaps Ahaz felt threatened. You see, the kings of Judea were called the 'sons of God.' (This title was based on Psalm 2:7, 12) And this unborn child who was the sign had a very special name. God with US. No longer was the king special. But this child would be. Ahaz refused to listen to the voice of God.

If you or I had been God, we would probably have said, "Oy vey, you evil king! You have refused to listen. That is it. Your time is up, and your kingdom is over!" But God has a lesson for all of us. God does not withdraw his promises or his loving kindness just because of a person's unfaithfulness - even a King's unfaithfulness, because of a leader's unfaithfulness. God was and is always faithful to His promises and to the oaths He makes. He said: 'I'm going to send this child, I'm going to send this baby, whether Ahaz fails Me, or not. This child will be born.

With hindsight, we can see it very clearly: there are two children blended in this prophecy, one born in the days of Ahaz and one who was yet to come. "The virgin will conceive, and his name will be called Immanuel". And there was a child born in Ahaz's day. He was not the ultimate "Immanuel," but this child too was a sign.

Remember that two of the prophets during the days of Ahaz were Isaiah and Hosea. The children of both prophets served as signs to Ahaz and to the nation.

Hosea's children were...

- Jezreel ("God will sow" [judgment]),
- Lo-Ruchamah ("Not pitied" [not beloved]), and
- Lo-Ami ("Not my people").

There is a real child motif here. The names of Isaiah's children point even more strongly as signs to the people:

- Shear-Jashub ("The remnant shall return": Shear = remnant, Shuv = return), Isaiah 7:3.
- Immanu-El (Imanu = with us, El = God), Isaiah 7:14; 8:8.
- Mahar-Shalal-Hash-Baz ("Hasting to the spoil; swift to the prey" [the enemy]), Isaiah 8:3

In Isaiah, 8:18 we read,

"Behold, land, the children which Jehovah has given me for signs and types in Israel, from Jehovah of hosts, who dwells upon Mount Zion. SIGNS and WONDERS." [emphasis author]

His children were signs and mysteries, symbols of the future - and that from the LORD of hosts, who dwelt on Zion. In accordance with His counsel, the LORD had selected and named these children as signs and types. He who could bring to pass the future chose them to set forth what was to be, as surely as He was the LORD of hosts. He would bring these things to pass as surely as He had chosen Mount Zion for the scene of His gracious presence upon earth. Shear-Jashub and Maher-Shalal were, indeed, not just as symbols of future wrath but also of future grace. Isaiah and his children were figures and emblems of redemption opening a way for itself through judgment.

But now, let us look at another child: The Royal Child, Isaiah 9:6-7

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

Immanu-El and the Royal Child stand out because of two things. For Immanuel, the mother would be a virgin. And for both, they are called by a divine name.

Look now at the child who was born in the days of Ahaz. When that child grew (we don't know the name of the child, but we know that there was a child and that this child was a sign), hear this: that child was to signify that God is with His people. Amidst all the trial and tribulation and pressure that the nation of Judah faced - even though their King betrayed them, even though their King buckled under the pressure of human men and kings and politicians - God remained with His people. That's what 'Immanuel' meant to Isaiah. The child would be born some day. He would be a foretaste. But this foretaste would also signify judgement upon Ahaz, judgment upon Assyria, the Northern kingdom of Israel and Syria, and would signify deliverance for the people of Judea. The child would signify divine hope, God's grace, God's faithfulness in the midst of failure.

Now, this name 'Immanuel' is only found three times in the word of God: it's found here, in Isaiah 7:14, then it is found again in chapter 8 and verse 8, and then it's found in Matthew 1 and verse 23. But, as we look at 'Immanuel' in the Hebrew, ~~Immanuel~~ we can see it more, not as a name but as a title or a promise, is an abbreviation. Let's look at Exodus 20:19.

And they said unto Moses, you speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die.

Again, in Numbers 10:32, is a positive verse. It is expressed in the Psalm 46:12: ~~Immanuel~~ *The LORD of hosts is with us; The God of Jacob is our refuge.*

"God with us" was not a new concept, but the sign of the Virgin who was to give birth to a man called "God with us": that was radical! The phrase can have two meanings in Isaiah: it can either mean that 'the birth of this child signifies God's hand on us' (simply that God is looking after us, that God was caring for His people), or, the second meaning of the word could be this: that God is not just looking after us, that God doesn't just have His hand on us, caring for us and planning our greater good, but that the birth of the God / Man - God's very presence - had come to actually dwell within the body of this child. Which meaning is it?

Well, if you turn to Isaiah chapter 9 and verse 6, you see that it says: "For unto us a child is born," speaking of this child, Immanuel. - "Unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, The mighty God', the everlasting father and the prince of peace!"

~~Immanuel~~ *Immanuel*

All these names are only used of God in Isaiah. Most of these names are used exclusively throughout the Old Testament for God alone.

The birth of this child was not simply to signify (like a badge or like a license) to God's people that He was with them and that they could produce it, they could show this child to prove that God was with them. This child was more than that: this child actually signified the living presence of the eternal, mighty God with His people. And this child was not born in Isaiah's day. But the first sign of His coming - the affirmation that He was coming, was born in Isaiah's day. That may have been what Immanuel meant to Isaiah.

What Did "Immanuel" Mean to Matthew?

The second question that I've asked is this: what does Immanuel mean to Matthew? If you turn to the second reference to 'Immanuel,' in Matthew's gospel chapter 1 and verse 23, you read that very famous verse: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, And they shall call his name Immanuel; which is, being interpreted, God with us."

What did this name 'Immanuel' mean to Matthew? What did it mean to the Jews back in the days of the apostles, to the Jews Matthew was writing to? My mind wandered as I asked myself this question. The famous French Jewish artist Marc Chagall once drew a series of pictures in black charcoal of a Russian winter landscape at twilight. It was clear that there was a lot of snow. There was a dreary, dark house in the background that looked lonely and desolate. Right there, in the midst of the storm, all that could be seen was a dark black house shadowed with the silhouette of leafless trees. It was a sad picture, Chagall drew it more than once. But in another picture he changed the whole drawing with one quick stroke - just one quick stroke, with a bright yellow crayon, Chagall simply put in a streak of light coming from the window. The effect was revolutionary, it was light in darkness, because the entire scene was translated from a dark and gloomy winter landscape into a vision of a loving home with light and comfort.

When I read the Gospel accounts I sense that darkness (Isaiah 9:1, Matthew 4:16).

*The people that sat in darkness
Saw a great light,
And to them that sat in the region of the shadow of death,
To them did light spring up.*

And yet, in the person of Y'shua, we see that ray of light in the house. That is what the name 'Immanuel' meant to Matthew; that is what the name 'Immanuel' meant to God's people, the Jews, at this time. John wrote, in 1John 1:5, "And this is the message which we have heard from him and announce unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all." It was as though a streak of light had burst into the darkness: Y'shua the Messiah, the Light of the world, the Immanuel, that child that would be born in darkness and would be the Light of the world.

*A light for revelation to the Gentiles,
And the glory of your people Israel.*

Luke 2:32

The point of it, the point of the name Immanuel, is this. The only time it is mentioned in the New Testament is in Matthew. It is there in order to show that, just as the sign given to Ahaz was to signify the hope of Israel, and deliverance and grace, so too, the birth of Messiah, was perceived as the "Immanuel" who would signify deliverance.

He would signify God's saving act among His people. The birth of the first sign, the child in Ahaz's days as well as the fulfillment of Immanuel in Y'shua, signify that God's presence is with His people through a child. We know that of Immanuel it was also said: '...and a child shall lead them (Isaiah 11:6). Isaiah's child points to the Messiah.

Immanuel is not just a prophecy; it is a sign pointing to the birth of the Lord Y'shua, the child that was conceived in the womb of Mary, that child who was conceived by the Holy Spirit who overshadowed her to bring forth the true IMMANUEL, GOD-WITH-US.

Immanuel in Our Days

Can I ask you this morning: Have you ever met Y'shua the Messiah? I ask you what does Immanuel mean to you? Yes, he is a man, born of Mary, he is even a Sign, but he is not just a man and not just a Sign. He is also God in the flesh; He is that child that leads us through the darkness, and gives us peace. He will come back soon to reign on the earth. Do you know Him?

Traditionally, it is His birthday we celebrate soon. If you do not know Him, call unto Him, and He will answer you. That is the Grace of the Lord. He brought forth salvation unto ALL men.

If you already believe, and you have received the grace of the Lord Y'shua already, what does Immanuel mean to you? God Made Manifest. The Eternal, Blessed Be He, who stooped down into time and space. What a wonderful stooping this was! He took upon Himself flesh; He took upon Himself humanity, only to be rejected and despised. Yet, for you and me, He is the Visible, Magnificent, Manifest Presence of God; He is the One we worship, God Manifest God with us. This is the Y'shua we worship; this is the Y'shua we know.

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:20, "We are ambassadors therefore on behalf of Messiah, as though God were pleading with us: we ask *you* on behalf of Messiah, be reconciled to God." That is what Y'shua did, beginning at his birth and enabling the whole in his death. Will you become his ambassador?

Paul writes in Colossians 2:9, "For in him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." But the words of Y'shua speak the loudest. John recorded them in his gospel in John 14:20. "In that day you shall know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you." Just as the divine presence dwelt within Y'shua, so Y'shua dwells within all of us. He is calling us to share that good news, "Messiah within us"- not the news of the world, but the good news of the Immanuel, the Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

Summary

Isaiah's day Immanuel: God as the guide to the King

Mathew's day Immanuel: God dwelling in Y'shua; the God-Man with us

Our day Immanuel: Not just a Guide, not just Y'shua dwelling with us, but God in us.

Final Prayer

May we, at this time and in this season, share the Good News of Immanuel, God with us and in us, His love revealed through us. 1 John 4:9-11:

By this was God's love revealed in us, that God has sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, if God loved us in this way, we also ought to love one another.

Father, help us at this time and in this season to share this message of Immanuel. Y'shua with us.

Amen