

Fourth Sunday of Advent • December 19, 2010

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Isaiah 7:10-17

"Emmanuel"

Who do you trust to take care of you?

A few weeks ago, I was up in Chicago visiting my family. Chicago, like D.C., knows a little something about politics, especially when it comes to elections. One of the biggest political stories on the local news and in the paper involved someone else who's spent a bit of time here in the D.C. area, Rahm Emanuel. Mr. Emanuel, as you might know, is looking to be a candidate in Chicago's upcoming mayoral race, and that isn't sitting well with a number of folks back in the Windy City. A number of people are contesting his eligibility on the grounds that he hasn't been living in Chicago while serving as President Obama's White House chief of staff. It seems like people are coming out of the woodwork to contest Mr. Emanuel's candidacy: the election officials report that there could be 52 rounds of questioning as part of the eligibility proceeding. The objectors are saying, "**He hasn't been with us.** He's been living someplace else for the past couple of years." But why all the hubbub? Are these objectors particularly concerned about where this candidate lives, or are they really concerned that he might win the election if allowed to appear on the ballot? In some ways, this controversy boils down to the question of who the people are willing to allow as their mayor, the person in authority – who they trust to take care of them. Will it be Mr. Emanuel, or someone else?

The episode we hear recounted in today's Old Testament reading from Isaiah 7 involves another Emmanuel; though this one is decidedly different than the one that's looking to be mayor of Chicago. This Emmanuel, prophesied by God through Isaiah, is a sign, and more.

Allow me to set the scene. We're dropping in to the middle of a situation that has the makings of a national crisis. King Ahaz, descendant of the house of David and ruler of the kingdom of Judah, seems to be caught between a rock and a hard place, as we might say. The entire region lives under the thumb of the Assyrian empire, a status quo that few, if any, of the kingdoms around Judah wanted to see continue. Accordingly, Syria (the capital of which is Damascus) and Israel (the northern kingdom that broke with Judah in the wake of King Solomon's death), these two neighbors come to King Ahaz and Judah with the following "offer:" Join with us to overthrow Assyria and free our kingdoms from their power – or resist, and *we* will attack Judah, overthrow you, put a puppet on the throne, and attack Assyria anyways. Let's call that "Option A." Not being a big fan of Option A, Ahaz comes up with "Option B:" appeal to Assyria for help against Syria and Israel.

Now in case you haven't heard about the Assyrian empire before, remember that these are *bad dudes*. Other nations feared Assyria for their brutality: when they captured a city, they would impale people on spikes out in front of the town as a calling card. Bad dudes.

But Isaiah comes to the king with "Option C." In the verses just prior to our reading today, Isaiah calls King Ahaz to have faith in the Lord. Through Isaiah, God tells Ahaz that Syria and Israel will not be a threat to Judah. Ahaz and his kingdom need not fear, because those two nations will be defeated and decimated in the near future. **Trust in Me, the Lord says, and I will take care of you.** As a token of his faithfulness, God offers a sign to Ahaz. This isn't just some small thing, like parting the Jordan River or making a staff turn into a snake: here, the Lord is offering the king carte blanche, indicating the scope of His love and concern for His people.

But Ahaz trusts his own wisdom over and against God's word through the prophet. Rather than allow for the possibility that the prophet will indeed be proven right by God's sign, Ahaz twists the Scriptures to his own ends, answering, "I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test." To the bystander, this might seem like a pious answer; however, it is only a veneer that masks the

king's lack of faith in God. The scripture that he quotes is about demanding proof from God, a demand that rises out of doubt. When the Lord offers a sign, on the other hand, the faithful action is to do as God has indicated! The truth is that Ahaz has already made up his mind. He's going with Option B, Assyria – the empire that is his kingdom's ultimate enemy.

But God will give a sign, even though the king and people of Judah have wearied His prophets and tried His divine patience. Isaiah's response to King Ahaz's false piety and lack of faith is telling: no longer does the prophet refer to the Lord as "your God," now, it's "my God." Ahaz has shown that he does not trust God to take care of Judah. He has alienated himself and his house from God. Even so, the Lord will still deliver a sign – a sign of both blessing and woe. A maiden shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name "Emmanuel." **Emmanuel translates to "God-with-us."** We don't really have the details to determine who the short-term fulfillment of the prophecy was, but we do know that God did deliver on His promise: both Israel and Syria did fall. Those threats to Judah were destroyed. That's the blessing. The curse came as a consequence of the king's lack of faith: Assyria would turn on Ahaz and impose harsh demands on Judah, and the royal line of David would fall.

Isaiah's prophecy was ultimately fulfilled in **the true Emmanuel, Jesus of Nazareth**. As we look ahead to Christmas in this week ahead, Matthew reminds us that a virgin did give birth to a baby who was not just a sign, but the real thing: God-with-us.

Who do you trust to take care of you? Who is it that you trust to be in charge of your life? When there's a lot to be done, as seems to be the case these days, do you find yourself relying on your own wisdom, your own plans, your own strength? Do you find that, in practice, you don't really want God to be with you? If we do indeed have a God who is "Emmanuel," God-with-us, then that means that you and I aren't the end-all and be-all in this life. Putting our trust in God to take care of us can, in fact, be a woe: like Ahaz, we're tempted to trust in our own strength, wisdom, and abilities over and above anyone else. That sinful part of us gets overruled when God is with us – we can't play god! But we don't need to play god when the real God calls us to trust in Him.

Emmanuel is a blessing to God's people. He's not some leader who's been away in some far-off realm for years, apart from His people, and is now looking to come and take over. We have a God who has always acted in history to show love and concern for people like you and me, even when we've been trying to go it on our own. Jesus, that child born of the virgin, is the ultimate evidence of God-with-us. He is the fulfillment of God's promise through Isaiah, even for us today.

In Emmanuel, what does God promise you? Victory over all the things that hassle and annoy you in this life? Victory over all your opponents and enemies? Or is the promise His presence in your life? Even though the world might keep throwing burdens at you, saying, "Trust only in yourself!", **Emmanuel is calling you to trust in Him.**

Where in your life do you need to trust God right now? In these days of hustle and bustle before Christmas, you're probably got a lot to do with work, school, or family. What are the things that you've kept to yourself, working like you alone have the wisdom or ability to take care of them? Are you pushing God away to make room for your own way of doing things? Lay your concerns down at Jesus' feet, knowing that God does not leave you to walk through life alone. Ask for God's forgiveness and guidance, because He is willing and able to give you both.

In Jesus, Emmanuel, God is with us. In the days ahead, when you see the manger in a nativity scene, remember that you have a faithful God. When you see the Christmas tree, remember that you have a faithful God. When you see the cross, remember that you have a faithful God. He has come to be with you. That's what we're celebrating as Advent gives way to Christmas. In the days ahead, may your faith be strengthened to trust **Emmanuel** to take care of you.

Amen.