

A Promise Kept

Christmas Message 2011

Well Christmas is here and when you do what I do there's at least twice a year when everybody knows what you're going to talk about before they get to church: Christmas and Easter. Which makes it kind of hard to come up with new material. I'm not complaining, I'm just saying.

So this year I want us to look at this story that we all know so well from a little bit of a different angle. I enjoy the challenge of looking at things like that so that's what I'd like to do today.

This may be new to some you, old to others of you, but the birth of Christ, the reason we're here, the reason we celebrate Christmas was the fulfillment of about 60 specific prophecies. If you've ever heard the scientific probability of that happening it's off the charts amazing. For one person, one life to fulfill 60 prophecies with their birth is astronomical.

There's a mathematician out in California, his name is Dr. Peter Stoner. Yes, his name is Dr. Stoner and he's from California. He gathered about 600 of his students and grad students together and tried to calculate, conservatively, what the odds were of someone fulfilling just 8 of the Messianic prophecies from the Old Testament.

I don't know the in's and out's of that process but this is what they came up with. The odds of just one person fulfilling 8 of the Messianic prophecies is a 1 in 10^{17} . That's 1 in 1.7 sextillion, or 1 in 1,700,000,000,000,000,000. That's a big number.

That's just 8 prophecies and Jesus' birth, just his birth, was the fulfillment of 60 specific prophecies. His life was the fulfillment of over 300. But just his birth, the event in history that we are here to celebrate tonight was the fulfillment of 60.

Now, I want us to look at one of those prophecies today. The reason I want us to think about the Christmas story from this angle of prophecies being fulfilled is because it addresses an issue that I think we all deal with at some point in our life. At one point or another we all wonder, we all question, we all have this thing inside of us that thinks, "Is God active in my life? Is He active in this world?"

It's fairly easy for most of us to look around and think, "I believe in God." or "I believe Jesus is the son of God but... is he active in this world? Is He active in my life?"

When we get really honest, sometimes we have a hard time seeing evidence of God's activity.

We aren't in that place emotionally or mentally all the time but there are certainly times when you look at world events, when you look at the events of your own life and wonder, "God doesn't seem to be showing up like an all-powerful, omnipotent creator should be showing up. He doesn't seem to be real active right now. It's almost like he spun the top and got everything going and then left the room. Or maybe He pushed the first domino and everything is happening as a chain reaction because of that." Have you ever been there? I certainly have.

If we're honest, it just seems, at times, that God is distant, that He's aloof, that He's not actively participating in our world or in history at the present time.

But then I come to the Christmas story and specifically the part we're going to look at today and for me it just pumps up my confidence in the fact that God is active. Not just in my life but He's active in history. The Christmas story fills me with confidence that he is active even when there is no evidence pointing to that fact. It pumps up my confidence, you could even label it my faith, in the fact that He's got a plan and a purpose and history is headed somewhere. It's not all random, it's not just a chain reaction, there really is a purpose and plan for my life and a plan and purpose for history.

Let me show you what I mean. We're going to spend the majority of our time in *Isaiah 7* this morning but I want to read the Christmas story part first. So if you want to mark *Isaiah 7* and then turn over to *Matthew 1* we'll read that first. I want to read you the fulfillment of the prophecy first and then we'll going to go back to *Isaiah 7* and unpack it. We'll throw all of these verses up on the screen so we can all follow along.

We all know the story, we've even heard it tonight, an angel comes to Mary and tells her that she's going to have a baby but there won't be a man involved. If that didn't convince her that it was going to be a special baby I don't know what would have.

She had been pledged to marry Joseph, which meant they were engaged but they weren't married yet. Joseph finds out she's pregnant and he decides to divorce her quietly.

Then the Bible tells us that an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and says, “It’s OK. This baby is not of you, it’s of no man. It’s a special baby so you need to go ahead and take Mary as your wife because this is all a part of God’s plan.”

Let me read that part of the story. This is the angel talking to Joseph. *Matthew 1:21*, “*She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. ²²All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet.*”

Here’s where the prophecy comes into the story. Here’s what the prophet said, *v. 23*, “*The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel*” -which means, “*God with us.*”

So Matthew, as he put his account of Jesus’ life on paper says, “Just so my 1st century Jewish audience understands what’s going on; this wasn’t just any birth. This was a birth that we were promised hundreds and hundreds of years ago. This is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah that we all know so well.”

We’re going to unpack Isaiah’s prophecy in a second but what fascinates me most about it is that this prophecy about the virgin being with child and giving birth to a son, was made 730 years before Christ was born, it made absolutely no sense and it had absolutely no impact on the person it was given to.

This is the most well known prophecy that’s talked about the most around Christmas but when it was originally spoken it made no sense and had absolutely no impact on the person it was given to.

Let’s take a look at the prophecy. We need to take a look at the historical context of what was happening at the time. In *Isaiah 7*, the nation of Israel had divided into two separate kingdoms at this point in their history. I’ve got a map to show you the southern kingdom and the northern kingdom. The northern kingdom (pink) kept the name Israel, the southern kingdom (blue) took on the name Judah.

The King of Judah’s name was King Ahaz and he had received a message that Israel had joined forces with a country called Aram (green), to the northeast of Israel, to fight against the Assyrians and they wanted King Ahaz and his army to join them.

Now, Assyria was not just a nation. Assyria was an empire. Assyria was huge. They would dwarf the two kingdoms of Israel.

King Ahaz knew this. He knew it was foolish to pick a fight with the Assyrians. But he also knew if he told the king's of Israel and Aram "No, I don't want to fight the Assyrians with you guys," they would use that as an excuse to invade Judah. Israel was always looking for an excuse to invade and take over Judah mainly because Jerusalem, their holy city, was in Judah.

So Ahaz is in between a rock and a hard place. If he says "no" he's in trouble with Israel and Aram, if he says "yes" he's in trouble with the Assyrians. But he takes a chance and sends a message back to the King of Israel and says, "We're not going to commit mass suicide by fighting the Assyrians with you guys. You go ahead but count us out."

Sure enough, the king of Israel sends his army straight to Jerusalem. Ahaz choose the lesser of two evils and found himself being attacked by Israel. The good thing was Jerusalem defended itself and Israel withdrew and camped outside of the city walls. For the time being everything was fine.

Then Ahaz received really bad news. A message came to him saying that the Aramians were slowly advancing to Jerusalem. Which meant he was about to face the combined forces of Aram and Israel from all sides and Ahaz knew he had no chance to defend Jerusalem against both armies. And King Ahaz got scared, really scared.

But Ahaz had another problem. Ahaz was a wicked king who had abandoned God's law, God's covenant, and temple worship. He set up idols all throughout Jerusalem and even sacrificed his own son to a pagan god on an altar of fire.

He's a horrible king, not to mention a horrible man, which meant there was one option he did not have. In the past, when other nations would threaten God's people, the king would go to the temple and throw himself on the altar and say, "God deliver us. You made a promise to protect us and provide for us and we need you to come through for us again." The king could go and remind God of the covenant He made with them and God would do amazing things to protect them. But Ahaz didn't have that leverage with God. He was a pagan king, he had abandoned God's law.

Into all of this drama, God sends a prophet to speak directly to King Ahaz and to the people of Judah. That prophet was Isaiah and that's where we pick up our story.

Isaiah 7:2, “Now the house of David(that’s Judah) was told, “Aram has allied itself with Ephraim(that’s Israel); so the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind. That means they were really scared. ³“Then the LORD said to Isaiah, ‘Go out, you and your son Shear-Jashub, to meet Ahaz at the end of the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Washerman’s Field. ⁴Say to him, ‘Be careful, keep calm and don’t be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood.’”

This is fascinating to me. Here’s this horrible, pagan king, turned his back on God, sacrificed his own children to a false god, but through Isaiah God says to King Ahaz, “Keep calm and don’t be afraid. From my perspective, these two nations, Israel and Aram ...they’re has-beens. They’re like smoldering stubs of firewood. They’re a thing of the past. Sure they burned hot for a while but they’re done now. Don’t lose heart, don’t be afraid.”

To which you want to ask, “Why would God say that to a wicked King who had turned his back on Him and lead the people into idol worship?” We’ll come back to that in a minute.

Isaiah goes on in *v. 5, Aram, Ephraim and Remaliah’s son*(that’s the King of Israel) *have plotted your ruin, saying, ⁶“Let us invade Judah; let us tear it apart and divide it among ourselves, and make the son of Tabeel king over it.”* They’ve already planned the destruction of Ahaz and his kingdom. They already know how they’re going to divide it up and who they’re going to place on the throne to rule over it. That’s their plan but here’s God’s plan.

v. 7, “Yet this is what the Sovereign LORD says: It will not take place, it will not happen, ⁸for the head of Aram is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is only Rezin. Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be too shattered to be a people.” God says, “Don’t be afraid Ahaz, within 65 years the nation of Israel won’t even exist.”

v. 9, “The head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is only Remaliah’s son.” He’s saying that Israel and Aram are only as strong as their leader’s. Then the last part of the verse, *“If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.’*

This is really important. God is saying to Ahaz, a terrible King, “I’m giving you another chance. I’m giving you an opportunity to return to the faith of your ancestor’s.

You know about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. You know how I've been faithful to this nation in the past. You know I've made an unconditional promise to this nation. So Ahaz, I'm giving you another chance, return to me, stand firm in your faith and watch what I do on your behalf."

Apparently, when Isaiah was communicating this to Ahaz, he wasn't buying it. He's scared but he's not scared enough to return to God. ***10**Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, **11**"Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights."*

Isaiah says, "Before you completely ignore God and write him off as an option to save you, ask Him for a sign. If you don't believe me, just ask Him for a sign.

Ask God to do something so unbelievable it'll make you stand back and say, 'Wow! That must be God. Just come up with something, doesn't matter how high or deep He has to go to do it. Just ask him for a sign.'"

God is essentially writing Ahaz a blank check. You ask me for anything and I'll do it. But Ahaz doesn't go for it. Look at ***v. 12***, ***But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, I will not put the Lord to the test."*** Sounds kind of virtuous doesn't it? "Oh no, I don't want to test God." At first glance, it looks like Ahaz has some newfound respect for God and doesn't want to take advantage of His generous offer but that couldn't be further from the truth.

If you read ***2 Kings 16*** it gives us the history that parallels what's happening here in ***Isaiah 7***. In ***2 Kings 16*** we find out that Ahaz had already enacted a different plan. Ahaz knew he was no match for the combined army's of Israel and Aram so he went into the temple, took a portion of the treasure, loaded it up, and sent it straight to the King of Assyria. His plan was to bribe the King of Assyria to come to his defense.

2 Kings 16 records the letter he wrote to the King of Assyria and it went something like this, "O King of Assyria, I am your servant. Please come and save me from the armies of Israel and Aram and in return you will have my allegiance." Ahaz completely overlooks God and asks for the King of Assyria to come to his rescue.

Apparently Isaiah already knew about this plan or had heard about it because he responds quite strongly.

v. 13, “Then Isaiah said, ‘Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also?’” In other words, “Ahaz, God is willing to intervene on your behalf and you’re going to ignore Him? You’re rejecting an offer that’s never before been offered to men? Just name a sign.” *¹⁴Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign:”*

You don’t want to pick a sign, I’ll give you a sign. You don’t want to come up with something spectacular, then God will come up with one for you.

It’s almost like God was saying, “You’re not going to invite me to the dance, I’m coming anyway. You’re not going to ask me to act on your behalf, I’ll do it anyway.”

At first it’s almost like God is bullying him, right? But the reason God was so adamant and persistent with Ahaz is because hundreds of years earlier God made an unconditional promise, a covenant, to this nation.

Long before Ahaz was even born God told the nation of Israel, “I am going to be your God whether you act like I am or not. This is not conditional. This is not “if you”, “then I”.”

But Ahaz doesn’t care. He doesn’t want to ask for a sign. He’s got the help of the Assyrians on the way.

God says, “That’s ok, I’m going to give you a sign anyway and when this sign takes place the whole world will know that I am the God that keeps His promise.”

Here’s the sign. *v. 14, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”*

And?

That’s it?

That’s the sign? A girl’s going to have a baby? How is that going to protect us from Aram and Israel?

The Hebrew word used here for “virgin” simply meant a young unmarried woman or a young woman of marriageable age. So imagine, here’s what Ahaz heard, “God’s going to give you a sign to demonstrate his faithfulness to this nation.” “OK, let me have it.” “A young woman’s going to have a baby... and it’s name will be Immanuel.”

This had no impact on Ahaz, at all. It didn’t change his mind, didn’t make any sense, didn’t even sound like a sign. I mean, women have babies all the time.

But then Isaiah goes on to tell Ahaz exactly what would happen from that point on. He talks about the two nations of Israel and Aram being destroyed and how that will happen through the rest of chapter 7 and 8.

Then in Ch. 9 listen to what Isaiah said 735 years before this baby was born. *Ch. 9:6, “For to us a child is born, (that’s not that unusual) to us a son is given (happens all the time), and the government will be on his shoulders. (OK, maybe he’s going to be a king or some political figure, big deal.) And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”*

“Whoa, what a minute Isaiah, did you just say that God would be born?” There’s nothing in Hebrew literature that talks about this, this is new information. It almost sounds like blasphemy, “Did you say a baby would be referred to as ‘Mighty God’? God’s going to be born?”

But Ahaz shrugs it all off, turns around, implements his plan and ignores everything Isaiah just said. But sure enough, everything Isaiah prophesied came to pass.

Within 12 years, just as Isaiah prophesied, Israel had been so decimated by war with Assyria that they surrendered.

Within 20 years later, just as Isaiah prophesied, the armies of Assyria marched right through the northern kingdom, to the gates of Jerusalem. There was a king in Jerusalem at the time named Hezekiah. He ransomed the city from the Assyrians by taking all of the treasure out of the temple and giving it to the King of Assyria.

90 years later, just as Isaiah had prophesied, the Babylonians attacked the Assyrians and conquered their empire. No one thought the Assyrians could be conquered. Under the leadership of King Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon marched their armies south, all the way to the gates of Jerusalem, destroyed the walls of Jerusalem, destroyed the temple and exported the best and the brightest back to Babylon. If you know the story of Daniel, that’s when that took place.

Surely the Babylonians would reign forever. But the next group to come along were the Persians and they conquered the Babylonian Empire. The Persians reigned for over 300 years. It was an empire that would never be defeated, never be conquered. In fact they called their king “The King of Kings” because they were so dominant.

Until Alexander the Great came along and conquered that region of the world for the Greeks. Certainly the Greeks would reign forever until the Romans came along and conquered them.

By that time, Ahaz was long forgotten and Israel began to wonder if the words of Isaiah would come true. There was no evidence of God's activity in their lives or in their nation. It had been over 400 years with no prophets, no king, no word from God. Their nation had become the marching ground of the empires to their north and south waging war on each other. They had no economic or political or military leverage in the world.

Where was God? Where was this promised child that would save them politically and economically and nationally? Where was Messiah?

Then... 730 years later, when the table was set just how God wanted it, He sent the angel to Mary and said, "You're the one. You're the virgin spoken of long ago by the prophet Isaiah."

He sent the angel to Joseph in his dream and told him Mary was going to have a baby and they were to name him Jesus. All of it would take place to fulfill what God said through Isaiah. The prophecy that made no impact, that made no sense, that didn't change anything at the time. The prophecy that said:

²³"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" -which means, "God with us. (I love the next verse) ²⁴When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife."

Promise made, promise kept. Promise made, promise kept. It looked like God was inactive, looked like He was aloof or forgotten. It had been 700 years since Isaiah's prophecy. Where was God?

Isn't it true, we respond the same way? When he doesn't seem to be active, when He's not showing up like we think He should, when He's not working things out like we think He should, we just assume that He's not active.

I was thinking about that this week. If you were to ask my kids to build a case for my presence and activity in their life based on my willingness to give him what they want, when they want it, how good would the case for my existence be? If the only evidence for my presence and activity in my kids life was my willingness to give them

whatever they wanted, when they wanted my children might conclude that I don't exist. Or at least conclude that I'm not active in their life.

But my willingness to give them what they want, when they want it isn't the deciding factor of my presence and activity in their life. My love for them and knowledge of what's best for them is the deciding factor of my presence and activity in their life.

Here's the big take away for me. I don't know what you've been told about faith in God or how that's been defined for you. Maybe you grew up in a church that taught that faith is what moves God. But this is what I'm convinced of:

Perfect faith isn't faith that moves God. Perfect faith is the faith that moves us to trust God when it doesn't seem like He's active.

Perfect faith is what causes us to lean into God when your spouse files for divorce. Perfect faith is what causes us to trust in God when you lose your job. Perfect faith is trust that God is active even when one of your kids runs off in a direction you know is going to cause them nothing but harm. Perfect faith sustains when you lose a child.

Perfect faith is faith that pumps us up with confidence in God even when it doesn't seem like He's active.

Then we come to Christmas. Where God speaks in an unmistakable way, right in the middle of history that He's alive, that He's active, and that He keeps His promises. Even if it takes 700 years because God's promises don't have expiration dates.

Just as He promised Israel that there would be a Messiah, just as he promised Ahaz that there would be a virgin and she would give birth to a son and his name would be Immanuel, God with us, you and I have been given those two promises as well. We've been promised that Jesus will come again one day and in the meantime He's promised to never leave us or forsake us, He's promised to be Immanuel, God with us, until that time comes.

Just like the nation of Israel between the time of the promise and the fulfillment of that promise we find ourselves in an in-between time. Jesus came into this world and took care of our sin problem but then he said, "I'm going to come back. Just as I forgave sin this time, I'm coming back to remove sin for good the next time. And in the

meantime, you can trust me even when it seems like I'm inactive because I'm a God who keeps my promises. When it's evident and when it's not so evident."

Wherever you find yourself this Christmas, whether you find yourself questioning the activity of God in your life or if it's evident that He's active in your, the Christmas story screams to us that God is a God who keeps His promises, even when the evidence points to the contrary.

That's why we celebrate at Christmas. That's why it's more than just a nativity scene and a baby in a manger and presents and family and food. It's about the God who has invaded human history. It's about the God who has come to be with us and never leave us. It's about the God who keeps His promises.

As He kept them in the past, He will keep them today and every single day of your existence until one day, Jesus returns and removes sin, sorrow and death for good. And in that moment we'll be able to sit back and remind each other, "Promise made, promise kept."