***SIGNS OF THE SEASON***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

December 18, 2016

Texts: Isaiah 7:1-16 and Matthew 1:18-25

 It began about mid-October, in some places perhaps a few weeks earlier. About the time that jack-o-lanterns and Halloween candy began disappearing from the shelves, the signs of a new season began to appear – shiny stars, jolly snowmen, nutcrackers, artificial trees, sparkling tinsel, angelic-looking angels, red-nosed reindeer, and everything-Santa! All those familiar figures point toward the festive celebrations around December 25th just a week away and the yuletide traditions with which we mark this season. But aside from the shining star that led the wise men to Bethlehem and perhaps Gabriel and a couple of angels among the heavenly host, none of those other seasonal signs in the stores were part of that first Christmas. It is not that there were no signs to be seen around Bethlehem – there were – and all of them had deep roots in Israel’s history.

 As you heard from our readings this morning one of those signs was an unwanted gift to King Ahaz of Judah. The northern and southern kingdoms of Israel had split, and the northern kingdom under the reign of King Pekah had allied itself with King Rezin of Aram. Together they decided to overthrow Ahaz, take over the southern kingdom of Judah, and establish a puppet king in Ahaz’s place. Not being a particularly fearless king – recall Isaiah’s description of his heart shaking like an aspen in the wind – Ahaz decided that the best solution to this threat was an alliance with the biggest bully on the block, Assyria. With the Assyrians as allies, Pekah and Rezin would leave him alone. But there were inherent dangers with being the buddy of the bully, including the possibility that the bully might turn on his buddy!

 To this weak, wimpy, waffling king God sent the prophet Isaiah to offer some guidance and reassurance. Isaiah did not go alone; God had him take along his son, She-ar-jash-ub (meaning “a remnant shall return”), for the boy’s name was itself a hopeful sign for Judah. Prophet and son were to meet the king, not in the throne room of his palace, but on the street – *at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller’s Field* (near the Dairy Queen). This encounter would be on God’s terms, not on the king’s, at a site of God’s choosing in a public place where the prophet could be heard by all. How did Isaiah know the king would be there? Because that is where the Lord said he would be – and that was enough!

 The Lord’s message for the king was a hopeful one: *Relax, Ahaz! Don’t be afraid! Don’t let your heart tremble because of* (and here God talks a little smack about the plotting kings) *“these two smoldering stumps of firebrands”, for nothing will come of all this.* To a king who was shaking in his sandals, Isaiah brought divine reassurance – all would be okay! There was a lot of smoke but no fire in this threat. Ahaz had nothing to fear and need not ally himself with the Assyrian bully next door. He had God looking out for him! What more could a king ask! But Isaiah offers a word of caution: *If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all.*

 Ahaz had a choice – trust God or trust the Assyrians. Trusting both was not an option. We may not be kings, but we face the same kind of temptation all the time: Trust the promises of the Lord who we cannot see or touch, or trust someone or some tangible thing that promises us security separate and apart from God. Where do you place your trust? There are folks out there who will tell you that trusting God is fine for the religious part of your life, but not very practical when it comes to the real world. Being a saint in a world of sinners is not very practical. Yet you can’t get much more real-world-practical than the decision Ahaz had to make on behalf of Judah, and Isaiah’s advice was trust God and God alone! Our lives are not divided up between the religious and the secular. We are integrated persons with integrated lives, and the Lord reigns over all of life, not just some isolated religious part. To stand firm in faith is to trust God in all things, knowing that to trust God in just some things is not really to trust God at all.

 That is not to say that God does not work through other people and other things. Isaiah will later identify Cyrus as an agent of God for returning that remnant of Israel. Doctors can be the healing hand of God at work in our lives. Friends can speak the word of the Lord to us at opportune moments. But when the will of God conflicts with the will of others, when the advice of others contradict the commandments of God, then be assured that the only faithful path is to trust in God and God alone. There are a host of folks who will embrace the motto on a coin or bumper sticker – In God We Trust – but will have no hesitancy in compromising God’s demands for faithful, loving, forgiving lives. Faith gets tested by the realities of everyday life. The temptation to be unfaithful can be pretty great. Sometimes we need some assurance that God is still with us, some confirmation that God is still guiding us. Sometimes we need a sign!

 21+ years ago when Karen and I were trying to decide whether God was calling us to come here we asked God to give us a clear sign that this was where God wanted us to be. Then the Pastor Nominating Committee asked me to preach a sermon at the church where Becky Earhart’s dad was the interim minister, the same church in Fredericksburg that my sister happened to attend. “What a coincidence!” we said. “Okay God, just give us a sign.” Then the committee asked us to come to Staunton on the only day I had free in weeks to do so. “What a coincidence!” we said. “Now God, just give us a sign.” There were more of those coincidences and more requests for a sign, at which point I suspect God threw up divine hands and said, “This guy is a moron!” Coincidence is sometimes God’s way of working anonymously. We had our signs – a boatload – but we wanted a clear, unambiguous sign that even a moron like me could figure out. And maybe you have had that feeling too, that desire to know exactly what God had in mind for you. But then again maybe you are more like Ahaz.

 God offered Ahaz a clear unambiguous sign of what God’s will was for him. God even offered to let Ahaz pick the sign: *Ask a sign of the Lord your God, let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. Anything you want!* But Ahaz refused, ostensibly on faithful grounds (*I will not put the Lord to the test*), but in truth Ahaz did not want a sign from the Lord. Ahaz already knew what he wanted to do, ally with the Assyrians, and Isaiah had already made it clear that such an alliance was not what God had in mind. Isaiah saw through Ahaz’s charade of false piety, and called him to account with the stinging words: *Is it too little for you to weary mortals that you weary my God also?* And I wonder: do we weary God?

 Do we make God weary with our unfaithfulness, self-righteousness, and false piety? Do we weary God with our refusal to hear what God has to say or to do what God asks us to do or to go where God asks us to go? Do we weary God with our incessant demands and our constant questions (Why? Why me? When are we going to get there?) or do we weary God because we make no demands and ask no questions and refuse God’s invitation to hear a word from the Lord, as Ahaz did? Do we weary God because we ask for too many signs or because we ignore those signs God gives us? Do we weary God with celebrations of Christmas that have virtually nothing to do with Christ? In what ways do you weary God these days?

 Thankfully God does not grow so weary of us that God gives up on us. God perseveres in love. As Paul reminds the church at Rome: *While we were still sinners Christ died for us.* God didn’t wait for us to stop being divinely wearisome and then reward us. God came to us despite our sin, came to save us from sin. As Isaiah told Ahaz, “Even though you want no sign, God will give you one.” The sign God gave to Ahaz was this: the birth of a child – a child already conceived by a young woman at the time Isaiah spoke to the king, a child whose name would be Emmanuel, God with us! By the time that child could tell the evil from the good, the two kings who were plotting to overthrow Ahaz would be long gone and their lands deserted. In the sign that was a child and in that child’s name – Emmanuel – Ahaz might find the assurance of God’s presence and God’s promise.

 More than 700 years later Matthew would recall that sign promised by God through Isaiah to Ahaz in describing the birth of another child,

a child whose birth an angel foretold to Joseph;

 a child who offers the assurance and promise of God’s presence;

 a child who is the fulfilment of the promise of Emmanuel, God with us;

 a child who comes to save us, not from the plotting of some smoldering stumps of firebrands, but from our sins.

Today we prepare to celebrate the birth of that child, a Savior who is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God. Two thousand years after his birth we remember his coming with hope and with joy, for he continues to be the sign of God’s presence among us, the sign of God’s love for us, the sign of God’s persistent patience with us – even when we weary God. As you prepare for Christmas this week and bask in the warm glow of all the signs of the season, remember the one sign who alone is God’s hope-filled sign for this season – the birth of a child – who is named Jesus and who is called Emmanuel, God with us – God with you! Amen