

During this season of Advent, we have been looking at the promises in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah to keep us grounded in preparation for the celebration of Christmas. The world around us tends to go a little crazy at this time of year. Some people enjoy rushing around, trying to get everything done. For others this is a time when anxiety builds, making it impossible to really celebrate the coming of the Lord.

In our reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah today, we read of King Ahaz. Ahaz was in a situation that brought him a very high level of anxiety. The kings of Aram and Ephraim were threatening to attack Jerusalem. The army of Ahaz was too small to repel an attack from Aram and Ephraim. Ahaz thought he needed to do something to save his kingdom.

In the Second Book of Kings, you can read about what Ahaz decided to do. The nation of Assyria was on the rise. They had the most powerful army in the world at that time. So, Ahaz decided to appeal to the King of Assyria to come to his defense. Ahaz wrote to Assyria saying, "I am your servant and vassal. Come up and save me out of the hand of the king of Aram and of the king of Ephraim, who are attacking me." And Ahaz took the silver and gold found in the temple of the Lord and in the treasuries of the royal palace and sent it as a gift to the king of Assyria.

The Prophet Isaiah told Ahaz to ask the Lord for a sign that the Lord would deliver him. Ahaz replied by saying, "I will not put God to the test."

That response sounded very pious, but remember, we are talking about a king who sent gold from the temple to a pagan king. We are talking about a king who told a pagan king that he would be his servant. Far from pious, Ahaz was being pragmatic. He did not have faith that the Lord would deliver him from the armies of Aram and Ephraim. He was pretty sure that Assyria could defeat Aram and Ephraim. So, Ahaz put his faith in a pagan king. That, after all, is how the world works.

God gave Ahaz the sign even though Ahaz said he didn't want it. He promised that in the time it took for a child to be conceived, born, and start eating baby food, Aram and Ephraim would not be a problem. The child's mother would call him Immanuel, because she would know that God was with the people of Judah.

In our reading from the Gospel According to Matthew today, we read of another man in a stressful situation. Joseph was engaged to Mary, but discovered that she was pregnant. Joseph faced a very difficult decision. He could have gone ahead with the marriage, but that was against the law given by Moses. It would have been like stealing another man's son.

Joseph could have disgraced Mary, and let the whole community know that she was pregnant with a child that was not Joseph's. That certainly would have vindicated him. He would never have to listen to accusations about the legitimacy of the child. She may have even been stoned for adultery. Who could blame him? After all, Joseph knew how women became pregnant.

Joseph decided instead that he would set the engagement aside quietly. This would give the father of the child the opportunity to claim his child. Unlike Ahaz, Joseph was making a decision that was genuinely a pious choice. He was not taking the easy way out.

A sign was also given to Joseph. The angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph and said, “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” Joseph trusted the Lord and took Mary as his wife.

Which would take more faith for you, to believe that the Lord would deliver you from an army, or believe Mary conceived a child by the Holy Spirit? Both would be a challenge to our faith. We know the way the world usually works. We need to remember the way the Lord works. Yet Joseph’s response was different from Ahaz’s. Joseph believed that the Lord could do what the Lord said He would do.

It’s interesting to note that both Ahaz and Joseph were given the promise of Immanuel, God with us. For Ahaz, the promise of God’s presence was not enough. For Joseph, the promise of God’s presence was all that was necessary.

The most important thing we celebrate at Christmas is the promise of Immanuel. We remember that the Son of God took on human flesh and lived among us. We remember that where he was there was healing, deliverance, and forgiveness. We remember his promise that he would remain Immanuel. He would remain God with us as he promised the disciples that he would be with his church until the end of the ages. We remember the promise that he will come again in glory to reign forever.

When we remember the promise of Immanuel, God with us, are we like Ahaz, or like Joseph? Is the promise of God’s presence with us enough? There are plenty of things that could make us anxious. I’m not going to list them, because I don’t want to add to anyone’s anxiety. I probably do not need to list all of them anyway.

As we prepare to celebrate Christmas, remember the promise of Jesus. It is the promise that the child who was born to Mary in Bethlehem was truly God with us. In spite of what the people around him thought, he truly was conceived of the Holy Spirit. He truly was the one who came to deliver us from our sins.

Remember also that His presence with us did not end when he ascended into heaven. He has given us his Holy Spirit so he can remain Immanuel. He can remain God with us. And, remember the promise that he will come again with power to bring his kingdom to this earth.

If we keep our focus on the fact of the incarnation, the fact that Jesus brought the presence of God to us, then, we will celebrate Christmas like it is used to be. We can celebrate Christmas as it truly was meant to be celebrated. And, we can find the strength we need to face any challenge with hope because we remember that God is with us.