

THE SIGNS OF THE SEASON

Isaiah 7:14

INTRODUCTION:

Well, we had a light frosting of snow overnight on Friday into Saturday. The decorations are up around the town and around the church. There is a Christmas concert at the school this afternoon and a community Christmas Celebration here this evening. And, on our Main Street, the displays in the department store windows are truly works of art. OK, that last one is a bit of an exaggeration...in fact, it is a bold-faced lie. But other than that, the signs of the season are all around us.

You know what?

- There was no snow on the stable in Bethlehem: it is a warm climate.
- There were no decorations in the town and there weren't any churches yet that could be decorated.
- The only Christmas concerts were on the hillside to some farmers who were looking after their livestock.
- And the Main Street merchants didn't do anything to mark (or to market) the occasion.

But for all of that, there were some signs of the season. Predicting the first Christmas, the prophet Isaiah wrote:

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.*

(Isaiah 7:14)

Since Isaiah identified the sign of the season, I thought we might spend a few minutes thinking about that sign.

As with many prophecies, in this one, there is both an immediate application and an ultimate application to the prophet's words.

I. THE SIGN POINTED TO SOMETHING NEAR

Isaiah's ministry included the time of the reign of King Ahaz, the eleventh king of Judah. Ahaz is judged by the Hebrew historians as having committed such abominable pagan practices as sacrificing his son and the worship of false fertility gods and goddesses.

During the reign of King Ahaz, the Assyrians, became a super-power and most of the other kingdoms were forced to pay tribute to Tiglath-pileser, the king of Assyria. But two countries decided to resist Assyria. They were Syria and Israel, which was the northern kingdom of the Jews.

Aram, the king of Syria and Rezin, the king of Israel, tried to get the king of Judah to join their alliance against Assyria but King Ahaz refused so these two neighboring nations attempted to overthrow Ahaz.

God sent the prophet, Isaiah, to Ahaz, the king. Isaiah's message for the king was:

Be careful, keep calm and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood—because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and of the son of Remaliah. Aram, Ephraim and Remaliah's son have plotted your ruin, saying, "Let us invade Judah; let us tear it apart and divide it among ourselves, and make the son of Tabeel king over it." Yet this is what the Sovereign LORD says: "It will not take place, it will not happen."

And then God warned Ahaz,

If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.

Ahaz was a wicked king but God gave him a message of salvation. Then God told Ahaz that he should ask for a sign as evidence that this good news was real and not too good to be true. God told Ahaz, "you can ask me for anything, no matter what, and I will do it to show you that you can believe the good news of your salvation."

But Ahaz refused to do what God said. He refused to ask for a sign as confirmation of the Lord's promise. So God said to him, "if you won't ask, I'll give you a sign anyway...a sign of my own choosing: a virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."

Let's look at the signs and see where they point us.

A. A YOUNG WOMAN WILL CONCEIVE

Have you ever heard anyone say that the Hebrew word translated "virgin" could also be translated "young woman"? Sometimes people, who have heard that, will repeat it as an argument that Jesus was not born of a virgin.

It is true that the Hebrew word *הַעַלְמָה* (*almah*) can be translated as virgin or as young woman. And, in the immediate fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, a young woman did indeed conceive. She was his wife, who was a prophetess. And we know she was not a virgin because Isaiah 8:3 tells us that Isaiah, himself, was the father of her child.

This unnamed prophetess was the woman of promise about whom God had told King Ahaz. She was a part of the sign that pointed to God's offer of salvation to a man who needed it.

B. A SON WILL BE BORN

Isaiah 8:3 records that the young woman conceived and that she gave birth to a son. There was nothing remarkable about this son's mother, his father nor his birth. He was a son like any other Jewish boy – except that he was a child of promise. He was the one about whom God had spoken and Isaiah had prophesied.

C. A NAME WILL BE GIVEN

The young woman conceived and gave birth to a son and Isaiah 8:3 specifies that the Lord said to Isaiah, Name him "Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz."

- There was nothing special about a young woman conceiving except that this young woman's pregnancy was a sign that pointed to something.
- There was nothing special about a son being born except that this son was a sign that pointed to something.
- And there was nothing special about naming him "Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz" except that...OK, that's a pretty weird name. I have to admit it. Not every Tom, Dick and Harry is named Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz. Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz was less of a name and more of a sentence. Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz meant "quick to the plunder and swift to the spoil." God told Isaiah to give his child of promise this special name because before the boy would be able to talk, King Ahaz would be defeated and Judah would be plundered by the Assyrians and his people would be carried off as spoils of war.

Ahaz had been given an offer of salvation but he rejected it. Instead of standing firm in his faith, as God had told him to do, he tried to make a peace treaty with the Assyrians. Instead of trusting God's promise, he chose to trust his enemy's promise. And ultimately, it cost him his kingdom and his life.

Ahaz had been given an offer of salvation, which he rejected, and the sign pointed to his condemnation.

II. THE SIGN POINTED TO SOMETHING AFAR

As I said earlier, in many cases, the Old Testament prophecies had both an immediate application and an ultimate application. Such is the case with the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14. The immediate application is that God gave Ahaz a sign that pointed to his destruction because he rejected the salvation that was offered to him.

For the ultimate application of this prophecy, we need only turn to Matthew 1:18-23. In that text, Matthew records that a righteous man by the name of Joseph received a visit by an angel who told him that his fiancée was pregnant and would have a son and that they should call his name, Jesus. Matthew takes pains to point out,

²² *All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:*
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.”*

You see, the birth of Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy some 750 years earlier. I know that the birth of Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy because Scripture says it is. Let’s look at this fulfillment to see where the sign points.

A. A VIRGIN WILL CONCEIVE

As I had said earlier, the Hebrew term for “virgin” can be translated as “young woman”. And the term did mean a young woman in the case of the immediate fulfillment through Isaiah’s wife, the prophetess.

But in the case of the ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy, the term clearly means “virgin”. Joseph said he had never had sexual relations with Mary. In Luke 1, when an angel tells Mary that she is with child, she asks how this can be since she has never been with any man.

There is no doubt that the unmistakable sign that Isaiah foretold was that a virgin would conceive. God had offered salvation to Ahaz and gave him a sign to confirm that. God has offered the world salvation and has given us an unmistakable sign to confirm it: a virgin will conceive.

B. A SON WILL BE BORN

Joseph was told that his virgin fiancée would conceive and bear a son. In that culture, it was important that this baby was to be a son. Women had been prophets in Old Testament times. Women had been judges. But Israel never had a female priest. And Israel never had a queen. Some may immediately think of Queen Esther but she was a Jewess who was a queen in Persia.

No woman in Israel is ever crowned as queen. A woman never served as priest or king in Israel. The child of promise that the angel declared to Joseph would be a priest and a king so he had to be a son.

C. A NAME WILL BE GIVEN

The angel told Joseph that this one would be *named* Jesus because he would save his people from their sins. “Jesus” means “the Lord saves”. Do you see the parallels? 750 years previous, a man who desperately needed it was offered God’s salvation if he would but accept it. And Ahaz rejected the offer.

Now, Joseph is told to name this boy, “The Lord Saves” because he will save the people from their sins. God still offers salvation to people who

desperately need it and he offers it through the son – but this time it is an offer that is for all the people.

Matthew specifies that his name will be Jesus because he will save his people from their sins. His **name** will be Jesus but he **will be called** Immanuel – which means “God with us.” Joseph was told that the virgin would conceive and bear a son and he would be given a name that points to both a savior and a partner.

CONCLUSION:

So what were the signs of the season? What are the signs of the season?

- A virgin will conceive
- A Son will be born
- A name will be given

And to what do the signs point?

For Ahaz, they pointed to an offer of salvation that could be accepted or it could be rejected. The young woman conceived and gave birth to a son and he was given a name that God had chosen. Because God's offer of salvation was rejected, all the signs then pointed to judgment and condemnation.

For you, the signs point to a virgin that would conceive, a son that would be born and a name that would be given. If you accept God's offer, the name that is given will mean your salvation. If you reject God's offer, the name that is given will mean your judgment and your condemnation.

The signs of the season all point to God's only begotten son and you will decide if he will be the cause of your salvation or the cause of your condemnation.

One day when heaven was filled with His praises, One day when sin was as black as could be, Jesus came forth to be born of a virgin, Dwelt among men – my example is He.

One Day the trumpet will sound for His coming, One day the skies with His glory will shine.

What kind of a day will that be for you? A glorious day or a terrible day? It's up to you.