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Sermon Series: *Advent's Adverbs, No. 1*

Patiently

November 27, 2022

Isaiah 7:10-15 (NIV)

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."

¹² But Ahaz said, "I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test."

¹³ Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. ¹⁵ He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right..."

We are in the book of Isaiah today; I'd encourage you to turn there with me – Isaiah, Chapter Seven.

Have you ever made what turned out to be a bad decision because, honestly, you were impatient and you made the decision in too much of a hurry? Can you think of a time – does one particular time come to mind – when you paid a price, maybe literally or maybe figuratively, for your own impatience?

Today is the first Sunday in the church season of Advent.

The word "Advent" means, "the coming into view," or, "the arrival," which, for us, means the *arrival* of Jesus, the *Savior* God promised to send.

He is the One for whom the world waited.

Throughout history, however, different people waited in different ways, depending on who they were, what they experienced, and how they thought and felt about God and what He was doing in the world.

So, in these Sundays approaching Christmas, we're going to look at how some people handled that time of waiting, and in them we'll probably also see something of ourselves. We start today with a person whom you might consider a strange choice: King Ahaz, a rather obscure king of Judah, who lived over 700 years before Jesus' birth.

What in the world does King Ahaz have to do with Christmas?

By the time of Ahaz, God's people, the Hebrews, had for centuries operated as two separate nations, the result of a family quarrel that dwarfs anything between the Hatfields and McCoys.

The northern tribes kept the name Israel. The southern tribes took the name Judah.

Ahaz became Judah's king when he was 20 years old and reigned for 16 years. He was the son of Jotham, who was a good and godly man, but Ahaz did not embody his father's godliness, and over time he departed, nearly completely, from the Lord's ways. He adopted the practices of idol worship. He desecrated God's temple in Jerusalem. He even participated in child sacrifice, to the point of sacrificing his own.

Throughout his reign, he did lots of terrible things, mostly having to do with the institution of large-scale idolatry in Judah. So bad was his behavior, that, even though he was buried with his ancestors in Jerusalem, he did not earn a place in the tombs of the kings. You can read about his reign in both 2 Kings 16 and 2 Chronicles 28.

So how is it that someone who was born in the line of King David, born from a godly grandfather Uzziah and a godly father Jotham, and who himself became the father of the good and godly king Hezekiah, how is it that a person like that could wander so far from his lineage and examples?

Many a parent, through the ages, has wondered the same thing, and while none of us can perfectly discern the motivations of the human will, we can often identify points along the journey that encouraged motion in one direction or another.

And we see here one of those moments in Ahaz life. A decision he made very early in his reign – a decision he made with rash impatience – wound up shaping both *his* destiny and the destiny of Judah, his nation.

Two of Judah's neighboring countries, Aram and (sadly) Israel – Judah's own blood relatives – agreed together to attack and overthrow Judah. They came against Ahaz several times, inflicting heavy casualties and plundering some of Judah's cities.

Because this was the first time, really, that Judah had *ever* felt threatened to this degree, there was great fear and confusion and even panic in leader and people alike, which also meant there was great potential for disaster.

You can imagine the scene: Ahaz's military and political advisors surrounding him, all suggesting different options and strategies. Some urged him to give in to Aram and Israel, to appeal to their mercy. Others were telling him to ask Assyria for help. Still others suggesting alliances with other nations: maybe Egypt or someone else.

It was into this fearful and unstable circumstance that God sent Isaiah with the message we read there in those first nine verses of chapter 7. It basically said, "*Ahaz, if you will put your trust in the Lord, you will have nothing to worry about. But if you won't, then you will not survive.*"

This was the message of the Lord, and also the point of decision for Ahaz. It's at the end of verse 9 there, and God wants to know in whom will Ahaz, the leader of Judah, place his trust?

We all know something of how Ahaz felt here. We all either have been, or will be, in a similar position.

Will we really trust a God that we can't see in the face of a crisis that we *can* see?

Is our trust in God really settled enough to do that?
Was Ahaz settled enough to do that?

That's the question of faith: do you really have it, or do you only imagine that you do?

That's the question, and the point of decision Isaiah is driving toward in verse 9 there as he warns Ahaz, *"If you don't stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all."*

There's a wordplay going on in the Hebrew there that different translations have tried to capture.

"Have firm faith or you'll fail to stand firm," or, *"without enduring faith you will not endure."*

I like the New Living Translation that says, *"If you won't remain faithful, then you won't remain standing,"* because in all times, but especially in times of great crisis, trust in God simply must come first.

That's what faith is: choosing to trust, regardless of circumstance.

And in order to *choose* to trust, one has to be *open*, in heart and spirit, to trusting.

If you're not, then there's no amount of objective evidence (there's no amount of proof) that will convince you of anything having to do with God.

You see, with Ahaz here, Isaiah could have recounted all the past successes of Judah – and there were many! Judah had succeeded in so many ways where the northern kingdom of Israel had failed, ultimately outliving her by nearly 200 years.

Since its beginning, the northern kingdom had been full of strife, jealousies, assassinations, and usurpers, and consequently suffered with lots of truly bad leaders.

But Judah was different. The house and line of David ruled the nation for over 500 years, and that gave Judah a stability that Israel did not have, because just as God had promised, He helped and preserved the line of David – *as long as they honored Him.*

And so, this was the great choice Isaiah presented to Ahaz here: would he exercise faith? Would he choose to trust God – the God of the Hebrews, or would he trust in some other power to preserve him and His country.

Isaiah fully realized the gravity of the moment here.

He knew the importance of the King's decision.

He knew the pressures the nation faced.

He knew the will of God.

But Isaiah also knew the disposition of King Ahaz had already proven to be not one of faith, and so he pressed him. He said, *"Ahaz, ask the Lord for a sign, a sign that proves what I'm saying is right – a sign that will cement your trust in Him. Ask Him! Ask Him for anything!"*

This offer of Isaiah's was truly what you might call a "blank check" proposition.

Those don't come around too often.

And yet Ahaz would not do it. In fact, his response, on the surface, seemed virtuous and

spiritual – saying there in verse 12, *"I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test."*

What Ahaz would not see is that it was he, and not the Lord, who was being tested.

As the king of Judah, of course he was Jewish in faith – at least on paper.

But *here* he was being urged to actually *act* on his faith.

Would he do it?

No, he would not. He rejects Isaiah's offer. He rejects God's help. He rejects even collecting any evidence of God's ability to help.

Why?

The fact is, his mind was already made up as to what he was going to do. He'd already chosen his way, which was to appeal to Assyria.

The deeper reason, though, is that, aside from appearances, Ahaz had neither faith, nor the desire to have faith, in God. He was not open, in head or heart, to actually trust in God, and so any evidence that would say he should would only confuse, and maybe even embarrass, him.

You see again that where there is no real will to actually trust in God, no amount of evidence will make any difference.

Actually, evidence just complicates things: it muddies the situation with facts.

To a person who is not inclined or not open to believe, no amount of evidence will ever satisfy or lead to faith.

It takes at least an inclination to faith to embrace evidence.

No matter what is said, no matter what objective evidence is presented, it's never enough.

It was bad enough for Ahaz to reject Isaiah's offer, but to do it under the guise of godliness and virtue as he does here? That must have made Isaiah mad.

You can hear it in his response in several ways.

For one thing, Isaiah refers now to God as, "my God," instead of as, "your God," or, "our God."

That's telling right there.

Isaiah also accuses Ahaz of trying God's patience, which is his way of saying, "Look, God and I both know what you're up to here; we both know that your heart is far from Him."

Isaiah was a pretty brave guy, you know? To come at the king like this.

He was brave because he was utterly convinced God was with him.

You and I could be that courageous too, if only we were as convinced of God's presence.

So that stuff in Ahaz response made Isaiah mad, but here is the even bigger issue behind his anger: Isaiah realized here that Ahaz is not just putting his own life in jeopardy, or just the city of Jerusalem, or even just the Temple and its treasures, or even just the whole nation of Judah.

In this act of distrust that Ahaz is committing, he is bringing to an end the whole Davidic line of Judah's leadership. That's likely why Isaiah addresses Ahaz, there in verse 13, as, "*You house of David.*"

God, through Isaiah, is calling Ahaz, Judah's leader, to decide: "Who are you going to be? What God are you really going to follow? Are you going to trust the Lord?"

But Ahaz would not trust. And so Isaiah knew, as John Oswalt puts it, "that this resolute act of *unfaith* signaled the abandonment of God by the (Davidic) dynasty and opened the door to its eventual destruction."¹

Ahaz's choice here had huge implications – as sin always does.

You see, there is no truly "private" sin. There is no act of "unfaith" that affects only us, individually. Our relationship with God – our trust in Him – is part of the web of relationships that we're all in with others.

Granted, Ahaz is a broad example, but the same is true for all of us, if only on a slightly smaller scale.

In spite of Isaiah's urging, Ahaz would not see – he would not even consider – the vast implications of his choice here, and how it would impact millions of people over centuries of time.

All because of impatience.

A *hurried* decision based on *incomplete* information, forced by a *terminal* lack of faith.

It led to the end of the house of David – at least in human terms.

But *thankfully*, *not* in *eternal* terms.

You see, because God is faithful to His covenant (His promise), even if humans aren't, Isaiah says Ahaz would get a sign from God. Whether or not Ahaz wanted a sign, whether or not he's even open to one, he will get a sign. This is why Isaiah then launches into a clear messianic prediction of the birth of Jesus, as it was interpreted by Matthew in his gospel.²

Even though, because of Ahaz, the *human* line of David has failed, God's promise of a Davidic savior *will still be fulfilled*.

Even though the *human* line of David lost faith in God, there will come one in David's line whose faith and trust in God the Father would remain unflinching and completely secure.

Even though the *human* line of David chose *foolishly*, there will come another in David's line, Isaiah says, who will choose wisely, every time.

Even though Ahaz's choice led to *tragedy*, there is another King to come whose choices will bring *victory*.

The descendant of David to come will wait patiently on God the Father's will and way and timing, and will do what is right in every circumstance.

And all those who will trust God – all who choose to believe – they will wait patiently for Him to come and be the King that Ahaz, and so many others, failed to be.

¹John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39* (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament), 1984.

²Matthew 1:23

As Matthew says of Jesus, hundreds of years later – pointing back to these very words of Isaiah, "*the virgin will give birth to a son, and they will call Him Immanuel – God with us.*"

He will fulfill God's promise.

He will save His people.

He will keep David's line, and be a King after God's own heart.

It's understandable how we might be tempted, just as Ahaz was, to respond to the crises of our world in such unwise haste.

We can surely understand how concerned he was.

As he thought of all those who'd already died, of all who were grieving...

As he stared at the armies arrayed against him there in the fields...

As he wondered how long his water supply would last there in the city...

As he worried about the welfare of all those for whom he was responsible, he rushed to choose what seemed best in the moment, without considering the longer view and the place of faith and the greater realities at work in our world.

But his choice led to so much destruction.

Please, if we ever find ourselves in that place, let's remember Ahaz and *not* do as he did.

As we find ourselves in times of great crisis, let's choose faith.

Let's intentionally open ourselves to trust, to believe God is real and able to work, so that our eyes might see the sign He wants to give.

And let's believe that our King really is Immanuel, God with us, even in the toughest of circumstance, and that if we'll wait patiently on Him, He will bring good and He will make all things right in His way and time.

So, Advent's adverb for us today is: *patiently*. Let Ahaz's life teach us its importance as we wait for the Lord.

Prayer: Lord, help us always, but especially in our times of crisis, to act on the faith we say we have, to trust that you really will work and bring good, if we'll wait on you.

Give us the faith to see you, to know you're there, to believe you care, and to trust your word, in spite of what we see – in spite of what seems to be reality. Help us choose to trust you and wait patiently for you to save. Amen.

Closing Song: *O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee*

Benediction:

Even in the hardest of times, waiting patiently on the Lord and His work – that's the sort of faith that will send, as the song says there, a shining ray of hope into the future.

May we live and trust patiently, so that God's glory would be seen through us.