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## The Obvious Choice

**Isaiah 7:2-16**

**Matthew 1:18-25**

*Introduction to Isaiah: Understanding today's reading from Isaiah is neither easy nor obvious. The people of God are divided into two nations: Israel or Ephraim in the North and Judah in the South. Israel and Aram (a nearby nation) have decided to wage war against Judah in order to overthrow King Ahaz, in part because he has refused to join them in an alliance to attempt to repel the Assyrian Army. So, not only is there a threat from the large and powerful Assyrians, but Ahaz now faces an imminent threat from Israel and Aram who join together for war against him. Any normal King would be very afraid. But, God sends the prophet Isaiah to King Ahaz to tell the king not to fear, but to trust in God for security – a tall order. God even invites Ahaz to ask for a sign. But, Ahaz refuses to ask for this sign – claiming to be pious – but more likely Ahaz refuses out of fear and a lack of trust. He doesn't really want to know what God wants of him. But God gives Ahaz a sign anyway. Isaiah points to some young woman – most likely a young woman known to Isaiah and Ahaz (she is not named) and says – “you see that pregnant young woman over there? Before her child can tell the difference between good and evil, he will be eating rich foods – i.e. not starving because of siege or war – and the kings of which you are afraid will be gone.” God's word is a word of promise and reassurance in a specific time of fear and political instability.*

*Introduction to Matthew: We don't read Matthew's account of how Joseph learned of Jesus' pending birth as often as we read Luke's account of the visit of the Angel Gabriel to Mary. But today Matthew gives us an example of how Scripture talks to itself. The Gospel writer reaches back into the writings of Isaiah to illustrate how God is at work in the world. But Matthew quotes the prophet Isaiah from a Greek translation of the OT – called the Septuagint. The Greek translators of Isaiah's prophecy had long believed God's words to Ahaz were both a reassurance to Ahaz and a promise of the coming Messiah. They understood God's reassurance to Ahaz to be both a call to faith in his own specific time and place – facing the armies of Israel and Aram – but also an enduring promise for the coming of the Messiah -who would come to the world from the nation of Israel/God's people. Often in the Hebrew Bible, God's chosen people are called “Virgin Israel”. So, when the scholars translated Isaiah's words into Greek, they chose words that expressed this messianic promise. They translated Isaiah's “young woman” as “a young virgin” to remind their readers that the promises of God are both current and eternal – true for a specific context and always true. So, Matthew uses this Greek translation of the Hebrew text to show that God was at work through another young virgin – this one named Mary – to bring the Messiah into the world – the one who will be named Jesus.*

We Christians are often confused and ambivalent when it comes to describing how God is involved in our lives and in the world. On one hand, we claim God's involvement in the smallest details of life and claim God's direct intervention in all sorts of things – from finding a parking place to providing good weather for an event important to us. Recently, The Session and Board of Deacons met together to hear the faith statements of the new Elders and Deacons – elected by this congregation – who will begin their service in January. And one of the incoming Deacons made the comment that he thought that Christians use the term “blessed” way too often and in ways that are just not true. I resonated with that sentiment. Is it appropriate to say, “We were blessed with beautiful weather for that wedding.”? Or, “I was so blessed to be delayed at work so that I missed that giant traffic accident on the Interstate!” We claim God's blessing for things as mundane as the outcome of a work project and as cosmic as the weather. And if I am blessed for missing that traffic accident, what does that mean for the people who were involved? I admit that I, too, am uncomfortable claiming God's direct intervention in events that are purely personal or that suit my schedule, needs or wishes. I'm not sure that the God who created the Universe really cares if our car repair is expensive or not. The God of all Creation does not exist to ensure that we don't get cancer or that we receive that raise at work. So, I agree that Christians toss around the concept of God's blessing with a breathtaking familiarity.

On the other hand, Scripture tells us over and over again about how God is involved in both the history of humankind and in the intimate details of our lives. So, we can be forgiven for our ambivalence and our confusion about what God does or does not want or will.

On this last Sunday before Christmas, we get two stories that tell us that God is in fact involved in our personal lives and decisions.

The Old Testament story assigned to today is like being dropped into the presidential briefing room as King Ahaz tries to figure out which way the political winds of the day are blowing and to discern how to secure both his life and power and the existence of the nation of Judah. There are two big threats to both. First, the kings of two neighboring nation-states – Aram and Israel (also called Ephraim here) – have made a plan together to invade Judah, kill Ahaz and install a king over the land who will cooperate with them. And this plan is driven, in large part, by the other big threat to Ahaz and Judah – the nation and the army of Assyria. Assyria is the ascending world power whose armies were in the process of taking over the known world and building their own empire. Faced with these two bleak realities, the obvious and right response is for King Ahaz to be afraid – very afraid. And, if all we knew was this outward reality, then the only obvious choice left to Ahaz is to choose his ally. He can choose to cooperate with Aram and Israel/Ephraim and resist Assyria's advance together. Or Ahaz could choose to reach out to Assyria and ask for their help protecting his position and his nation from the alliance of Israel and Aram. The choice seems obvious.

But in the midst of this obvious reality, God shows up in the person of Isaiah. God tells the Isaiah to go to Ahaz and say, “take heed/notice, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart faint because of this political threat to your existence.” Then, God – through Isaiah – tells Ahaz that Aram and Israel will be destroyed and that their bid to destroy and to control Judah will fail. Ahaz clearly has a difficult time believing Isaiah’s word. Because when Isaiah invites Ahaz to ask for a sign from God that this message is true, Ahaz demurs. He says that it is because he is pious and doesn’t want to trouble God. But his other actions let us know that this is more likely because he is paralyzed by fear and distrust. Ahaz is so afraid that he either doesn’t believe Isaiah or he doesn’t really want to know what God wants him to do. The obvious choice – if God doesn’t meddle – is to negotiate with Judah’s enemies to forge a political alliance to mitigate or postpone the Assyrian threat. The obvious choice is NOT – stand firm in faith.

The story of Jesus’ birth from Joseph’s perspective is very similar in some ways. Joseph is a righteous man, says Matthew. So, when he finds out that his engaged wife is pregnant, the obvious choice is to divorce her – to end the engagement. He is nice about it. He is planning to dismiss or put Mary away in a private, less humiliating way. But Joseph is clearly thinking of his own ego, reputation and heart – now that Mary has clearly cheated and rejected him as her husband. So the best course of action is obvious . . . until God shows up in Joseph’s dreams.

God shows up in a dream! I forget most of my dreams! What if I am missing all sorts of instructions!? Nevertheless, God shows up in Joseph’s dream and changes the obvious course. After God shows up, the obvious choice is to go ahead and take Mary as his wife. After God show up, the obvious choice is to name this child of uncertain origin “Jesus” – not Joseph, Jr. – but Jesus (a name meaning “to be saved”). Obvious . . . right?

The stories in Scripture of God’s way in the world remind us that God’s involvement in our lives and in our world is not always obvious.

This does mean that we should be more careful in our glib use of the term “blessed” as we refer to our lives and our world. And it also means that we cannot discount or deny God’s guidance and intervention in both the world of human history and in our own lives and decisions.

And Scripture shows us that God’s involvement in the world is often NOT obvious at all – even to the righteous and faithful or to the powerful who negotiate world history. What we do learn is that how God is involved in the world is clearer to those who are willing to refuse to fear and who are willing to stand firm in faith and trust. God’s involvement in the world and in our lives seems to be made clearer when we are able to act as if God’s kingdom and God’s rule are real and active.

The uncomfortable truth is, according to Scripture, is that we may be BLESSED to have our ego’s threatened, our nation under siege, and our fiancé discovered pregnant. They don’t sound like things we would be glad for, but they are definitely ways in which God was at work. So, when we face our own world and our own lives, we need to be careful identifying God at work. God’s blessing may not be that obvious. In fact, God’s blessing and work in our lives may be events

for which we are not grateful. The very things that we do not want, the very things that we fear might be the very intervention of God whose plan is not only unshakable, but whose plan is not obvious to us at all, unless we are paying attention to the prophets and acting as if God's rule is real and true.

IN fact, in two days from now, I hope that you will gather here for worship to say that we are blessed because God chose to intervene in human history. And we will remember again how few thought that it was an obvious choice for God to be born as a poor, Jewish baby who had no crib of his own, but gave up all of the power and safety of God's Kingdom to come into a human kingdom that would – from the time of his birth until we were successful – seek to kill him. We will remember again how blessed we are by this odd, unexpected, hard to recognize God intervention. We are blessed by his powerless and poverty stricken appearance. We are blessed by his humiliating and painful death.

Two days before Christmas, it seems to me that we need to entertain the possibility that the obvious choice of the faithful, is very different from what the world thinks of as obvious. We remember again how God at work in our lives and in the world has often not been obvious to those in power. That reminds us to question whether "the obvious truth" of both of the political parties in this country may in fact not be obvious to God at all.

Scripture says that God is indeed at work in the world, and is at work in our lives. Jesus, however, was not the obvious choice.

Let us pray:

O God of dreams and political fortunes, we pray that we may not confuse your Will and Way in the world or in our lives with our own wishes and wants. Help us not to confuse what the world says is obvious truth with your truth. Teach us to see as you see, to refuse to fear this world, and to know the voice of the true prophets when we hear them. O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.