

Making the Crooked Straight: A Savior Who Calms Our Fears
LaGrave Christiand Reformed Church
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Reverend Peter Jonker
Isaiah 7:1-17

So in the passage I am about to read, the prophet Isaiah engages King Ahaz of Judah. I wonder if you have any sense of who Ahaz is. If you grew up in the church, at some point you read the book of Kings, and perhaps you remember that the book of Kings gives a brief biography of each of the kings of Judah and Israel. Do you remember what Kings told us about Ahaz? Was he a good king who followed the Lord or was he one of those kings who did what was right in his own eyes? I'll save you the trouble of looking it up. You find the story of Ahaz in 2 Kings 16 and here's what it says: "Ahaz was 20 years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem 16 years. Unlike David his father he did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord." "He did not do right" is an understatement. Ahaz made his son pass through the fire. He sacrificed his own son as a way to earn the favor of some foreign god. Our text doesn't give any of that backstory, but as modern readers it's important for a full understanding of the exchange between the two men.

Ahaz hadn't slept in days. He hadn't eaten much either. Ever since he received the news about the armies of Aram and Ephraim marching out to conquer Jerusalem, his mind had been spinning. He paced the floors of the palace. He snapped at family members. He summoned generals asking them for updates on troop readiness. He obsessed on the city's defenses. Were the walls ready for an onslaught? Were the soldiers prepared? Was the city's water system ready for a prolonged siege? Ahaz is afraid. His heart was shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind.

Ahaz is afraid because he doesn't want to lose his good life. He likes being the man in power. He likes having people bowing before him. He likes his summer home on the Mediterranean. He likes his concubines. He likes his wine cellar. And more than that, he likes his life. He knows what invading armies do to conquered kings. Put out their eyes. Torture them and kill them. Hang their bodies in the city square for everyone to see.

When Isaiah finds Ahaz, the king is inspecting the city's waterworks, checking the aqueduct of the upper pool to make sure the water supply is strong and flowing smoothly. Isaiah comes to the king with a word from the Lord. "Be careful, keep calm, and don't be afraid!" says the prophet. Do not lose heart! These kings are just men. Their power is only human power! The Lord will deliver you! Remember that you are part of David's line and I have promised David that I would fulfill my covenant promises through his line! I will deliver you. I'll even give you a sign to prove my intention. Ask me for any sign and I will give it to you!" The Lord brings a word of reassurance to sooth the fear and panic of the king.

How does Ahaz react? "I will not ask for a sign! I will not put the Lord to the test!" How do we hear those words? If you don't know Ahaz, you might hear them as pious words of humility and faith. But we do know Ahaz. 2 Kings shows us his heart, and so we can be pretty sure that these are not words of humility and faith, they are Ahaz's way of getting the prophet to leave him alone. They are words of disbelief. Ahaz may be afraid. His heart may be shaking as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind, but he does not expect any help from God. This old-fashioned God that his great grandpa worshipped. This invisible God who never showed himself? This God who'd let his people deteriorate from the greatness of David to this state

where Judah was at the mercy of her neighbors? Please. “No. I don’t need a sign from God. I don’t believe he is with me. I don’t think he can do anything to help me with these oncoming armies. That’s your religious people’s answer for everything, isn’t it? Pray! Trust the Lord! Sorry Isaiah, you’re wasting my time. Leave me alone! I have real work to do.” Ahaz pushes aside the hope offered by God and his prophet. He chooses to address his fear with human solutions.

When he refuses to accept the prophet’s offer, Ahaz’s fear leads him into destructive places. Do you know what he ends up doing? This is also in Kings. He makes an alliance with Assyria. Instead of putting his trust in God, he put his trust in Assyrian chariots and Assyrian power. He bowed the knee to Tiglath-Pileser, the Assyrian king. He gave himself wholly to the ruthless ways of Assyrian power. To the point that on a state visit to Nineveh he had his people make a copy of the altar he saw in the temple there and he had a replica made for Jerusalem. He put it in the center of the temple and moved the altar of the Lord out of the way. He literally pushed God and his promises aside and worshipped at the altar of Assyrian might. It worked for a while. He got Aram and Ephraim off his back. But within a few years, Assyria was at the gates of Jerusalem ready to burn it to the ground. Fear causes Ahaz to make a deal with the devil, and when you make a deal with the devil, you may get short-term gains, but your long-term prospects are grim.

And that’s what fear does to people. It drives us to foolish and desperate choices. There’s a reason the most common Biblical command is do not be afraid, it’s because fear can make people crazy. Fear of losing power causes nations to enter into destructive wars with one another. Fear of looking bad makes otherwise sensible people pile lie upon lie. Fear of illness makes intelligent people spend 1000’s of dollars on useless medicine. Fear of aging leads middle-aged men to take up foolish affairs. Fear of being alone causes abused wives to stay with husbands. Fear is a powerful driver of human behavior. So much of what people chose to do, or choose not to do, is driven by fear. Which is why people who want to manipulate our behavior will often play on our fears. The commercial shows the woman out on a date with the handsome man, but midway through the date he notices dandruff on her shoulders and he calls for the check. Better use Head and Shoulders just to be sure! One political add tells us that if we elect candidate X there will be communism, vote for candidate Y. The other add says, if we elect candidate Y there will be fascism! Vote for candidate X! Each message is accompanied by scary imagery designed to play to our fears. Fear is a major contributor to our sin and our misery and so our Lord is constantly telling us, ‘Don’t be afraid!’

But the Bible’s message about fear is complicated. If all we say is, “Do not be afraid,” we haven’t captured the whole of Scripture’s teaching on fear. Not all fear is bad. There are plenty of times where the Lord calls us to be afraid, where God seems to want us to increase our level of fear. Just a couple of examples: In Mark 8 Jesus tells his disciples to be afraid of pride. “Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod,” he says. In Luke 12 he calls his disciples to be afraid of greed. “Watch Out!” He says, “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed!” And in the sermon on the Mount Jesus says, “Watch out for false prophets!” So there are times when Jesus wants us to be afraid, there are times when Jesus wants us to be on our guard.

Recognizing this tension-be afraid, don’t be afraid-is part of how Jesus helps us get our fears straight. A number of years ago Michael Gulker, the head of the Colossian forum-came to speak at Growing U and he said something that I found very helpful. He said that behind all our fears there is a love. Behind all our fears there is something we love. If I’m afraid of rising crime rates in my neighborhood, it’s because I love my family and want them to be safe. If I’m afraid of conflict at work, it’s because I love my job and don’t want to lose it. Maybe I complain loudly

that people in the church today don't know their theology and their Bible. That's because I love the church and I don't want it to weaken. Find a person who expresses a big fear and just below the surface of that big fear you will find a big love.

So getting your fears right is really all about getting your loves right. And getting your love right is the heart of the Christian life. Love the Lord your God with all your heart soul mind and strength-the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it-love your neighbor as yourself. When those two commands are the center of your love, they will get your fears in order. In fact, when the Bible calls you to fear God, it's really telling you to love God so much that you are chiefly concerned with pleasing him. When you love God above all and following him is your chief concern, all your other fears get straightened out. You have a fear of confrontation and you hate speaking out, but when you see something happen that violates God's justice and his goodness, you still speak out because your love of God is greater than your fear. You may be nervous about death and you may not be particularly confident of your ability to speak, but when your unbelieving neighbor is dying of cancer, you visit him and you share your heart with him and pray for him in the name of Jesus. Your love of God makes you plow through those lesser fears. Get your loves straight and all your fears will fall into their proper place. When it comes right down to it, Ahaz just doesn't love or fear God enough. He loves his power. He loves his stuff. And so he chooses an alliance with Assyria over the promises of God.

But notice what God does. When the fear of the nations around them has completely overwhelmed the faith of Ahaz and the rest of Jerusalem, when they are utterly paralyzed and hopeless, when human beings have abandoned the work of the kingdom, God acts. When humans refuse to ask for a sign, The Lord himself gives a sign. "The virgin shall conceive, and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. By the time he is old enough to know wrong from right, by the time he is two, both these kings you fear will be utterly defeated and the people of the land will eat curds and honey." "Ahaz, you do not believe I am here? I will show you that I am Immanuel, God with you. You don't believe I can save you? I will do more than you ask or imagine. You don't believe my promises are real? You shall see with your own eyes. When we fail to act, God acts. When we fail to light a candle of hope, God will light his own candle in the darkness.

God does the same thing 750 years later. Once again God's people are beset by enemies. Once again faith is low. Once again people have stopped expecting God to do anything. But then, in a simple house not far from where Ahaz had walked the walls of Jerusalem, an angel appears to a poor peasant girl, a virgin named Mary. The angel says, 'Greetings you who are highly favored, the Lord is with you! Immanuel, the Lord is with you. Mary, you shall conceive! The baby in your womb will save this world. His kingdom will never end. He will be the son of the most high. You shall call him Jesus.'" In the middle of a world where the flame of faith was low, where people had just about given up on the old promises, in a world where the only power seemed to be Roman power, in a world where the darkness seemed unassailable, God lights a candle and that candle was the light of the world. The light shines in the darkness, and even though it tries with all its might, the darkness has not overcome it. The evil one brought all his forces against this child, all the power of sin and death tried to swallow him. But he has destroyed their power. He has placed his love and his hope at the center of the world, and if give yourself to him, that same love and hope begins to fill you up and make your fears straight. Put his light at the center of your life and you will find yourself propelled into the great adventure of faith: going out into the fearful places of this world and lighting candles of hope.

I was thinking about the angel coming to Mary and Isaiah coming to Ahaz. I was comparing them in my mind. The great king who should have known better hears the promise of the prophet, and he refuses to ask for a sign. He rejects the hope offered to him. The 14-year-old peasant girl who has no power or position hears the word of Gabriel and what does she say? “I am the Lord’s servant; may it be to me as you have said.” This advent, the darkness is deep, and the candles are small, but as we light them may your heart say, ‘I am the Lord’s servant, may it be to me as you have said.’

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