Text: Isaiah 7:10-17

**Introduction**

I don’t know about you, but depending upon the day I go back and forth between two opinions about the state of the world in general. Some days – if you catch me on a good day – I’d say “same as it ever was.” The world has been full of strife and contention and envy and vice since Adam and Eve were driven out of the garden east of Eden. Call it my default “low anthropology.” Nothing much really shocks me. But then on bad days – days when I get told something that does shock me, you know the kinds of stories – I’m reminded that my low anthropology doesn’t just protect. It also predicts. Our sinful nature will invent new ways of doing evil. On good days I feel “yep, we are already at the bottom of the slippery slope”. On bad days I am fearful, “oh, there is actually a cliff a foot that way.”

**Text**

The story of Ahaz is the story of a cliff. You can find the cliff in 2 Kings 16, but it is worth quickly thinking about the entire roll down. Ahaz’s grandfather was Uzziah. You might remember that name because he is always mentioned in the prophet Isaiah’s calling when he see the train of the robe of the LORD fill the temple. “In the year King Uzziah died…”. Uzziah had been made king when he was 16 years old and he reigned for 52 years. The longest reign in Judah’s history. And both the prophets who wrote Kings and probably the priests that wrote Chronicles agree, “he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, according to all that his father had done.” Uzziah didn’t reverse any slide that has taken place. The “High Places” were still doing good business sacrificing to the Baals and Ashtaroth’s. But the King himself sought out the LORD and listened to the prophet Zechariah. And “God made him prosper (2 Chron 26:5).” The Chronicler records a good amount of those blessings. But they all go to his head. Maybe 40 years of success on the throne would do that to anybody. But, Uzziah decides that he should be the one to go into the temple to offer the sacrifice. This of course was not the King’s job, but the priests, and contrary to what God had decreed. Forcing yourself before God on the basis of your own worth is never a good idea. And Uzziah is struck with leprosy.

And things start rolling down a hill. Slowly at first the faster. Uzziah’s son takes over and largely continues the ways of his father, but without the notice that Jotham listened or cared about Word of God. He continued the practices without the faith. Which leads to Ahaz. Ahaz takes the throne when he is 20 years old and the prophets record “he did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord his God.”

It is that last addition “his God” that is interesting, because the LORD is clearly not Ahaz’s God. But the prophet insists – rightly – that the LORD is God, even if we don’t acknowledge it. But that “did not do what was right” understates the cliff. What did Ahaz do?

* “he sacrificed and made offerings on the high places on the hills.” Those places that Uzziah and Jotham had left, soon corrupted the grandson.
* “He even burned his son as an offering, according to the despicable practices of the nations whom the LORD drove out.” It should be shocking, killing one’s child, if it doesn’t become standard practice in the land.
* And when two neighboring Kings decide that Judah looks like easy pickings, and this is the time frame of our reading today, Ahaz sends the gold and silver from the house of the LORD to Tiglath-Pileser, King of Assyria asking for his help. We are going to return to this one, because it is our text today, Ahaz’s rejection of the LORD as his help, but there are more steps on the cliff.
* T-P, Tiglath-Pileser, does come. All the Gold of the temple must have been pretty good. That and he’d already taken the Galilee, the good portion of the Northern Kingdom. Why not take the rest? But he also invites Ahaz to meet him in Damascus. And after offering sacrifices on the great altar that TP had built in Damascus, Ahaz sends back drawings of it and tells the priests to build one just like it in the temple. Remove the Altar to the LORD and replace it with this ziggurat. And when Ahaz returns home – and the priests have done it - he brings his offerings to the pagan altar in the Temple. And then he commands them to bring all of Israel’s offerings to that altar. And they do.
* And in one final act, he tells the priests, that old bronze altar, the one his grandfather tried to offer on but was stopped, The one of YAHWAH, that’s my personal one, cut the frames off and put it on my personal stone pyramid.

Now I think there is a lot going on in that story. I think you could read Ahaz’s actions almost as his personal war against the LORD who had struck his grandfather with leprosy. That last bit of Ahaz claiming the Altar that Uzziah had wanted to use as his personal one is deep.

You can read that story of a generation who would not accept the correction of the LORD, giving birth to one that went through the motions, giving birth to one actively against him. And how things seem fine at first, but hit the cliff fast.

You can read it as warning about spiritual things we overlook. Uzziah didn’t have anything to do with the high places. They didn’t tempt him, although they did his people. But because he didn’t do his duty as the shepherd of Israel and remove them, his son passively encourages them. And then Ahaz, his grandson, is actively taken by them. The spiritual evil we overlook, or think will take care of itself, won’t. Evil must be actively opposed. And this calls for courage.

All of those are interesting meditations for our generations. Why are the grandsons at war with the LORD? Why is going through the motions so corrosive? Why do we think evil will take care of itself? Or refuse, if it is our responsibility, to cast it out?

**Christology**

But we should return more directly to our text. Even to one as wicked as Ahaz, God sends a prophet. And the prophet comes with a promise. The message God tells Isaiah to deliver to Ahaz comes right before our text. And it is a relatively simple message. These two petty kings that you are afraid of Ahaz, don’t worry about them. They are paper lions. In the words of the text they are smoldering stumps. They have already been cut off and burned. You do not have to do anything, God will do it, just believe the promise. But, “if you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.” Nobody else can help you. Not for the freedom you really want. I know what you are thinking. Don’t call on TP and Assyria. Don’t strip the temple. Don’t make the offerings on the altar of the powers of the world. They won’t really help. They won’t allow you to stand on The Day.

And Ahaz is given something more by the prophet that I think all of us would desire. “Ask a sign of the LORD, let it be as deep as Sheol or as high as heaven.” Imagine what you could ask. Let me talk to Grand-dad. Send the angels – the chariots and horsemen of Israel – as you did of old. Come down yourself, LORD, and let me see your face. Ask, and it will be given. Seek and you will find.

Yet Ahaz chooses this moment to feign piety. “I will not put the LORD to the test.”

But God wants us to know that our faith is not in vain. God wants us to be able to stand on THE Day. When the prophet is standing before you telling you to ask, ask.

But out of Ahaz failure, we have received a great sign. Out of his ruin, God brings forth deliverance. Isaiah still gives Ahaz a sign. Not that he will see it. He’s already gathering the gold of the temple to send to Assyria. But the sign is given. You can imagine this playing out in the midst of the court. Isaiah probably points to a young woman at the court. Look, behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son…and before that child is even a boy, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted. You can know that God is with you, yes even you Ahaz. This child is Immanuel.

That is the nearer fulfillment, the greater fulfillment is Mary with Jesus. What sign will be given? How will we know that we stand by faith? How will we know that the LORD himself has cut down our enemies to smoldering stumps? Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son. And His name is Immanuel. The LORD is with us.

And Christ has left Sin and Satan as smoldering stumps. And he has brought upon us such days as have not come since the day Adam and Eve departed the garden.

**Moral**

Ahaz didn’t see the sign. Joseph, another heir of David didn’t see it at first either. He resolved to divorce her quietly. But unlike Ahaz, when the messenger of God shows up to Joseph and tells him not to fear. Joseph did as the messenger said.

When we’ve been given the sign, we’ve been given the choice. When what we ask for has been given it demands certain actions. We now know. If not completely, we know that Immanuel has come. Do we follow Ahaz – to Assyria and abomination? Or do we follow Joseph? How we shelter the Christ child given to us is our path of faith.

**Eschatological**

Suitably the two smoldering stumps are the weaker enemies: sin and Satan. The birth of Immanuel is the sign of their defeat. The Christ child starts the victory. But one enemy remains. Death. The first Advent points at the second. The first freed us and settled accounts. The second shall defeat death. God’s story always works on promise and fulfillment. The Fulfillment of Christmas will become the promise of Easter. Those who have faith will stand secure. Even in the face of that final enemy. His land, death’s land, will be deserted. For God is with us.