

Counting On the Lord's Plan—God With Us!

4th Sunday in Advent; Series A

Isaiah 7:10-17

In early December of 1999 the now retired NFL wide receiver, Isaac Bruce, sat in front of the media and told a pretty incredible story about a personal experience. On the night of Dec. 7 Bruce and his girlfriend, Clegzette Sharpe, attended a Missouri basketball game in Columbia and headed east-bound on I-70 for the 115-mile trip back to St. Louis. Shortly after the drive began the left rear tire of Bruce's Mercedes blew, and the car skidded out of control toward a gully. Remembering advice his mother had given him long ago, Bruce, who was not wearing his seat belt, took his hands off the steering wheel, raised them into the air and screamed, "Jesus!" The car flipped twice and landed upright in the gully, and though the air bags never deployed and the convertible roof collapsed, as Bruce tells it, he walked away without a scratch and Sharpe suffered only a small cut on her forehead ("The Spirit of St. Louis," <http://si.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1018216/index.htm>).

Bruce went on to speak of the opportunity that all people have to call upon the Lord in times of trouble and moments of fear. He made a direct connection between his safety and his action of calling upon the Lord. He even made the subtle suggestion that those who do not make it safely through moments of trouble do not have enough faith or trust in God. They do not call upon the Lord rightly.

We might be a little suspicious of Bruce's direct correlation between his own work and action and the safety and deliverance that he experienced. After all, what kind of theology should we expect from the NFL? Yet, the incident does raise an important question for us to consider. It is the question that our Old Testament reading also raises. In whom do we place our trust at all times, especially in times of trouble and moments of fear?

In the Book of Isaiah the Prophet Isaiah writes to the nation of Israel concerning the coming invasion by the mighty nation of Assyria located to the Northeast of Israel and Judah. At the time that Isaiah writes, the people of Israel and Judah were living in fear of Assyria. The nation was getting bigger and stronger and were considering expansion in the near future. As neighbors of Assyria, the Northern tribes of Israel and the Southern tribes of Judah were obvious targets.

In their fear and panic, Samaria and Damascus of the Northern tribes of Israel sought to do something about their predicament. They tried to form alliances with other neighboring nations to fight against Assyria. Yet, Judah's leaders preferred to pay tribute to Assyria and exist in peace with them rather than join other nations in an alliance against Assyria. In a historical conflict known as the Syro-Ephraimite War, the Kings of Samaria and Damascus to the North tried to force King Ahaz of Judah to join with them rather than align with Assyria. In the beginning of chapter 7 Isaiah recounts the efforts of Samaria and Damascus to invade and try to overthrow Jerusalem in order to put a King on the throne that would join with them against Assyria. The recapping of this historical situation is important because our Old Testament reading this morning picks up in the middle of this conflict. Left with the choice between joining the Northern Tribes of Israel or aligning with the nation of Assyria, the Lord enters the scene through his Prophet, Isaiah, and gives King Ahaz, the King of Judah, a third option.

The Lord gives King Ahaz the option of calling upon him and trusting in him to deliver Judah in this time of trouble and moment of intense fear. Our reading begins with the Lord speaking to Ahaz. The Lord asks King Ahaz to give him a sign of his presence and protection for Judah. The Lord offers to protect and defend Judah not only from their Northern neighbors of Israel, but also to protect them from the nation of Assyria. Yet, King Ahaz responds to the Lord's offer with a lack of faith and trust in him. Rather than aligning with the Lord and answering his request for a sign of the Lord's presence and protection, Ahaz chooses to ignore the request. It is as if Ahaz says to the Lord, "I have made up my mind, don't confuse me with the facts!" By ignoring the Lord's request to give him a sign, Ahaz chooses Assyria over the Lord. In a time of trouble and moment of great fear King Ahaz, the King of God's people in Judah, chose to trust in his own alliances and his ability to make them, rather than trusting in the Lord and his plan.

The world around us is blinded by a worldview that does not explain the existence of the world and give credit to the Creator God who made it. As a result people look for assistance, help, and support from everyone and everything other than the Heavenly Father, the Creator of the Heavens and the Earth. People look to everyone and everything else other than our Triune God to provide for all their needs, to help in times of trouble, and to be present in moments of fear. In the world around us people are looking for salvation in manmade religions or the things they have done rather than looking for help in the gracious Lord who already provided for our eternity in Christ.

We also find ourselves trusting in our own strength or the strength of our own alliances rather than trusting in the Lord. We may make plans as though we had control of the future, many times without even praying and consulting our God for direction and guidance. Many times we bottle in our worries without resting in God's gift of prayer and "casting our anxieties upon him" (Phil 4:6). We trust our income, bank accounts, retirement funds, the government, to provide for all our needs, and we panic when these things fail us. We trust our military strength and power of might to secure our own peace and the peace of our allies.

As our Old Testament reading continues, in spite of King Ahaz's rejection of the Lord and his plan, God continues to lay out his plan and give Ahaz a sign of it. He gives Ahaz his own sign that he will deliver and protect his people from the Northern Tribes of Israel and from Assyria. The Lord gives King Ahaz and Judah the sign of Immanuel, a son, who will be born. When that child grows up and is about ten years old or so, the land of the Northern Tribes of Israel will be deserted and overtaken by Assyria. This is good news for Judah and King Ahaz. Their ally, Assyria, will come to the rescue and deliver them from harm. Yet, as we learn at the end of this reading, the Lord's prophecy is a double-edged sword. The other shoe drops in vs. 17 of our text. Since Ahaz does not trust the Lord and instead chooses to trust Assyria, the Lord will give Assyria to Ahaz. Isaiah prophesies that when Assyria overtakes the Northern Tribes they will not stop there. They will come and siege Judah as well!

It is to us that the prophet Isaiah's message still speaks. His message calls us to repentance. His message calls us to trust in the Lord and his plan fully, not only in our times of trouble and moments of fear, but at all times. Martin Luther reminds us in the meaning of the first article of the Apostles' Creed that God, our Heavenly Father is the one who provides, preserves, protects, and defends us (*Small Catechism*, "First Article of the Apostles' Creed") from all danger and evil. He can be trusted. Just as the Lord promised to Isaiah, so also God promises to be with us and give us the sign of Immanuel. The sign of Immanuel is a sign of hope and promise, of grace and mercy. In our Gospel reading St. Matthew proclaims Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. He is not merely a symbol of God's presence with his

people but *is* God in the flesh—the God man. He will deliver and protect the people of God, like the Immanuel of Isaiah’s day. He will deliver and protect not just Judah but all mankind. He will deliver them not just from the destruction of their city and physical death but from eternal death. He is not only a sign that we will be delivered but he is our deliverance. And so we celebrate his birth this Christmas and every Christmas.

Jesus has come to be with us and bring us forgiveness, life, and salvation. He is with us in the good times and the bad. We especially need to know that he is with us in the bad times. He is with us in times of trouble and moments of fear when everyone and everything else seems to be against us. He is with us when the bottom falls out and we are falling into despair and brokenness. He is with us through the tragedies of life, and through the valley of the shadow of death. He will take us through death to share the glory of heaven with him. *Trusting* in him and his promises we are truly secure in this life and in the life to come.

Martin Luther, in some ways, preempted Isaac Bruce’s action and advice about calling upon the Lord especially in times of trouble and moments of fear. Luther spoke about making the sign of the cross when something dreadful or frightening is seen or heard, and saying, “Lord God, save me!” or, “Help, dear Lord Christ!” (Large Catechism I:72-74, *The Book of Concord*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000], pp. 395-96). Let us frame our day calling upon the Lord and trusting in him at all times. In Luther’s Morning Prayer that we will pray together in a short while he reminds us that our Lord is the only one who truly protects and defends us. He is the only one who keeps us safely through the night and the day from all harm and danger. He is the only one we call upon at all times and in all places. He listens. He hears. He is Immanuel, “God with us.” Amen.