



ADULT STUDY

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT
Session 4

Peace, Justice, Joy, and Salvation: An Adult Advent Study

The Gift of Salvation: Restored to Wholeness

Introduction

At a fellowship event during Advent, a group of us was asked to think about the best Christmas present we ever received. A couple of us remembered receiving books and the joy of curling up on Christmas afternoon and reading to our heart's content. Some remembered a beloved doll. Others described their first bicycle and taking a long ride on an unseasonably warm winter day. My husband recalled the Christmas he spent as a novice in a Catholic religious community where there was little gift giving but which turned out to be one of the richest Christmases ever. All of us have memories of special Christmases and favorite gifts.

That conversation led me to wonder about the opposite. What about the *worst* Christmas present? Did you ever get something for Christmas that you honestly didn't want? Or didn't know what to do with? Or couldn't wait to get rid of? I'll bet you might be thinking of a particularly ugly tie or the sweater that surely matched someone's taste but not yours! Or maybe it was the expensive dress that didn't fit or the tools you knew you would never use.

I recall vividly the Christmas my mother gave me a small fleece blanket that she had received in the mail

for making a contribution to some charity or other. It was the year that I realized that she could no longer get out to shop and really had no energy to think about gifts anymore. Even though I was well into my fifties, it was the ugly little blanket that made me realize my childhood was well and truly over. But I also came to see that the only gift I could give my mother was simply to show up and be there with and for her.

This Advent, we have been reflecting on the great readings from the prophet Isaiah through the lens of gifts that God longs to give us, God's beloved children. We have considered the gifts of peace and justice and joy. Today, we come to the gift of salvation. This is undoubtedly the greatest of God's gifts: that God comes into this world, into our lives, to save us—to set us free, to make us whole, to make us new. But what happens if this is a gift that we don't really want? Or worse yet, what if this is a gift we think we don't really need?

Our story from Isaiah is about a man who really doesn't want what God has to offer. God extends the gift of salvation to Ahaz, but he is reluctant to embrace it. He is caught in a struggle between faith and fear. This passage from Isaiah figures prominently in the story of Joseph, the husband of Mary who, it turns out,

is caught in the same struggle (although with a much different outcome).

Focus Text: Isaiah 7:10–16

Ahaz was the king of Judah some two hundred years after his ancestor, King David. Ahaz became king when he was in his twenties, and he was, not to put too fine a point on it, a jerk. As we have his story in both 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles, he largely abandoned the worship practices of Israel and set up shrines to Canaanite gods under every tree he could find. The Bible even accuses him of the great horror of child sacrifice. But the immediate problem is political rather than liturgical. Judah's two neighbors to the north (Israel and Syria) have declared war on Judah, and Ahaz is intent on begging the dreaded Assyrian empire to intervene on his behalf.

Geographically speaking, this would be almost exactly as if the modern country of Israel today were under attack by Lebanon and Syria, and the prime minister of Israel appealed to Iraq to intervene on Israel's side. It doesn't take much understanding of international politics (then or now) to see that this is just stupid. Attempting to defeat two small enemies by appealing to a large, really dangerous enemy is not a good idea. And that is precisely what God has sent Isaiah to tell Ahaz. Just a few verses earlier, Isaiah says to Ahaz, "Do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands" (7:4). The threat from the kings of Israel and Syria will be removed, says Isaiah. All you have to do is trust in God, who has promised to be faithful to the house of David. But, Isaiah concludes, "If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all" (v. 9b).

Then Isaiah offers Ahaz a sign that what God has promised will come to pass. Ahaz compounds stupidity with arrogance. "Far be it from me to ask a sign!" He is determined to go his own way on the road to destruction. So Isaiah says, "Well, God is going to give you a sign anyway! A young woman is pregnant and will give birth to a son, whom she will name Immanuel, which means 'God with us.' By the time this child knows how to choose between good and evil, he will be eating curds and honey." What this means is that by the time this child is about two (knowing what they like and don't like), prosperity (symbolized by cheese and honey) will have returned to the nation because the threat will be gone. God will be faithful to you, Isaiah

says. God will be *with you*, and you will be saved from your enemies. All you have to do is trust in the power and goodness of God. Alas, Ahaz is not able to receive the gift God so generously offers.

Immanuel Again

The story of King Ahaz is linked to the story of Joseph (Matthew 1:18–25) for two reasons. First, according to the genealogy, Joseph is a very distant relative (separated by some six hundred years). Second, Matthew references Isaiah 7:14 as he recounts the story of the announcement of Jesus' birth. Like many other Jews of the time, Matthew was reading Isaiah in Greek rather than Hebrew. In the translation of the Hebrew Bible known as the Septuagint, the Hebrew word "young woman" was translated *parthenos* or "virgin." The verb tense is also slightly different: the Hebrew "is with child" was translated "*shall conceive*." So what was in Isaiah's time simply an interpretation of an impending birth (probably in the royal family itself) became a sign of a future event, which Matthew (and probably others) read as a foreshadowing of the birth of Jesus the Messiah.

Whether or not the Greek is a reliable translation has been debated for centuries. But which is the better reading of Isaiah is less important than the sign contained in the name "Immanuel." God is with us: that's the point. That was God's message to Ahaz; it is God's message to Joseph; it is God's message to us.

Joseph could not be more different from Ahaz. In the first place, he is not a king but an ordinary working man. Elsewhere, he is described as a carpenter, but a builder or general contractor would be more accurate. Here he is described as a "righteous" man, meaning he is a person of integrity and honor. He is engaged to Mary, which meant that they were already legally tied to one another and only waiting for the formal wedding. Breaking an engagement was tantamount to divorce. It would bring shame to Mary and her family, which this good man does not want. But he also does not want a pregnant wife-to-be so he plans to "dismiss her quietly."

It is then that the angel appears to Joseph in a dream (the first of three dreams that Joseph will have that will protect and preserve his family). The angel gives Joseph exactly the same message Isaiah gave to Ahaz: "do not be afraid." The angel tells Joseph that what he sees as

shame and dishonor is in fact the work of God. Joseph and Mary have an awesome and terrifying responsibility: to become the parents of the son of God. Then, the angel reveals the child's name (just as the angel did to

being freed from the burden of guilt or the debt of sin. But the word "salvation" has a much bigger and richer meaning. Several times in the gospels, we are reminded that "wholeness (or wellness)," "health," and "salva-

tion" are all the same word in Greek. In one story, Jesus asks a man who is crippled, "Do you want to be made well?" (John 5:6). You can just as accurately translate that as, "Do you want to be saved?"

Being saved is about being restored to wholeness, and it is the gift God wants each of us and all of us together to receive.

Mary according to Luke). They shall call him "Jesus" because "he will save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). "Jesus" is the Greek version, but it's an old and venerable name in Hebrew: "Joshua." It means literally "Yahweh saves"—"God saves." Joseph, the righteous man of honor and integrity, accepts the angel's message. He and Mary are married, and together they will parent the sign of God's enduring faithfulness to all humanity—the Savior. And faith has overcome fear.

The Gift of Salvation

In both cases, the gift that God offers is salvation. Ahaz and his people have no need to call on one enemy in order to defeat others. God will rescue or save them. All Ahaz has to do is trust in God's trustworthiness. Joseph likewise is offered the gift of taking part in God's plan to offer salvation to the entire world. Thankfully, he was a better man than the king.

The very same offer comes to each and all of us. But what *is* salvation? Christians often think of this entirely in spiritual terms. Salvation is about our souls or life after death. Others think of salvation in moral terms:

Being saved is about being restored to wholeness, and it is the gift that God wants each of us and all of us together to receive. God longs for us to be reconciled to one another and to God. God desires that we flourish as God intended: in community with one another and as stewards of creation. God wants to replace our brokenness with health and wholeness. God wants to make us "righteous," that is, to enable us to live lives of integrity and honesty. The question is: Is that what we want? Or would we rather be at war with ourselves and with one another? The answer would seem obvious enough, but all too often, our behavior suggests otherwise.

In Jesus born of Mary, God comes to live among us as one of us. God's presence among us opens the door to healing and wholeness. It's the most amazing gift of all: Christ was born to save. Jesus came to make us whole. May this be the gift we choose to receive this year.

Cynthia M. Campbell is former Pastor of Highland Presbyterian Church, Louisville, Kentucky, and President Emerita of McCormick Theological Seminary, Chicago.