



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Advent 4 (A)
December 21, 2025

RCL: Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

Opening Prayer |

O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity, your Son Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Context |

Isaiah 7:10-16 is situated during a time of profound turmoil and uncertainty in Ancient Judah. Israel and Judah, once a united kingdom, have long been divided and are now engaged in military conflict. Israel, the northern kingdom, allies with the King of Syria to plan an attack on Judah, the southern kingdom, to remove its king and install a puppet ruler aligned with their coalition against the encroaching and expanding Assyrian Kingdom. (See Kings 16; Isaiah 7:5-7) Ahaz, King of Judah, receives military intelligence confirming the alliance and the impending military incursion. Ahaz and all of Judah are deathly afraid, shaking “as trees of the forest shake before the wind” (Isaiah 7:2). Into this terror and uncertainty comes the prophecy of Isaiah, with a word promising divine protection.

While the threat of the northern kingdom alliance looms, the Book of Isaiah also makes clear that Judah itself is in a spiritual and social crisis. The Ancient Jewish people had long ago received from Moses the commandments and customs that ordered their lives around temple worship to the God they called Yahweh. Yet Isaiah, chapters 1-6, names Judah’s spiritual and social turmoil, as well as its hypocrisy: the people continue to bring burnt offerings to the temple while the poor, orphaned, and widowed are oppressed, and the worship practices that prevail in Judah are not offered to Yahweh (Isaiah 1:10-17; 2:2-8). Isaiah employs graphic imagery and bombastic language to detail the extent of Judah’s depravity. He tells how Jerusalem, located in Judah, was once a “faithful city,” “full of justice and righteousness,” but now “has become a whore,” lodged with “murderers,” and marred by a corrupt economy (Isaiah 1:21-23). Adding to this ongoing, widespread spiritual and social crisis, Ahaz, the King of Judah, has a track record of immoral and idolatrous leadership. Ahaz’s leadership would have disastrous consequences for Judah, leading it to become a client state of the Assyrian Empire.

Theological Reflection |

This week marks the fourth and final week of Advent. Christians around the world eagerly wait for the Christmas celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. Matthew’s Gospel for today proclaims that the birth of

Jesus through the Virgin Mary fulfills the centuries-old prophecy of Isaiah, which Matthew quotes directly: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us” (Matthew 1:23). These are the very same words we hear in Isaiah: “Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel” (7:14).

From the crisis in ancient Judah, we come now to another kind of crisis, in the family of Jesus’ birth. The birth of Jesus was marked by crisis. Joseph planned to end his engagement to Mary when he learned that Mary was pregnant, and not by him. And when King Herod learned from the wise men that the King of the Jews had been born, Herod enacted a policy of infanticide in and around Bethlehem. And yet in these crises, God intervened: revealing to Joseph the divine nature of Jesus’ birth and providing a plan of escape for the Holy Family to Egypt. The promise of the name “Emmanuel,” “God with us,” plays out in the temporal realm of Mary, Joseph, and Herod, as well as in the eternal one, in the incarnation of Jesus. “Incarnation” is a theological term derived from the Latin verb *incarnare*, meaning to make flesh. In the Incarnation, God takes on flesh to be “with us.”

Take a moment to consider that God—the invisible, all-powerful creator of heaven and earth—takes on human flesh and experiences the fullness of humanity. Mary joins God in this divine mystery. She is the bearer of the incarnate God forming in her womb. Mary and Joseph wait with anticipation for their divine son to be born, a son who “would save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:17). In Advent, we, too, wait with Mary and Joseph for the incarnate God to be born as Jesus, the Christ.

It’s tempting to circumscribe Isaiah’s prophecy as a proof text authenticating the birth of Jesus. Isaiah’s prophecy bears distinctive meaning in the context of the Old Testament, which also figures into Jesus’ birth narrative in the New Testament. We’ve seen how Isaiah describes the Kingdom of Judah in profound turmoil: internal and external threats abound, threatening its political and religious stability. Word of an imminent northern invasion spreads across Judah. King Ahaz and the people are deathly afraid—paralyzed, like “trees of the forest [shaking] before the wind.” They are unable to save themselves. Yet just when hope seemed lost, God spoke to the Prophet Isaiah a clear word of salvation, exhorting Ahaz through him: “Do not fear...it shall not come to pass.” As a sign of God’s promise, Ahaz would witness “a young woman...with child, a son [who] shall be named Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14).

Biblical prophetic literature lives in the tension between the present and the future. It speaks to the immediate moment and to an opaque, distant future. We read these prophecies in the aftermath of transcriptions and transmission across centuries; diverse religious communities long after the initial prophecy’s audience are entrusted with interpreting the prophecy in their own moment, with their own lens. So interpretations of this passage from Isaiah have varied. For medieval Jewish rabbis and scholars, the identity of the young woman and her child remained speculative; some speculated that she may be the wife of Isaiah or the wife of Ahaz, or even his daughter. One medieval Jewish commentator noted that the sign given to Ahaz was “a symbolic sign to ensure the prophecy is not forgotten” (Abarbanel on Isaiah 7:14, Sefaria, n.d.). However the prophecy was later interpreted, this is known: at a critical moment of uncertainty and turmoil for Ahaz and the people of Judah, the prophecy reminded them that God would bring salvation in the present and in the future. God was faithful to bring salvation to the ancient Jewish people: delivering them from bondage in Egypt, guiding them through the desert to the promised land, and giving instructions through the commandments and laws of how best to order their lives together. When internal and external turmoil threatened any stability, God remained faithful.

Taken together, today's Old Testament and New Testament lectionary texts reveal an enduring truth about the nature of God across time and space: God has been, is, and will be with us. God, from the beginning of creation to now has been revealing—in signs and wonders—God's faithfulness to all of creation.

We can see God with us in the prophecy to Ahaz. We can see God with us in the story of Joseph and Mary, waiting for the birth of their baby boy. We can see God with us, too, in the present uncertainties of our world. The incarnate God is with us.

Just look closely, and you will see the small and big signs of divine nearness: in our churches, our schools, our workplaces, our parks and forests; in the highways and byways, the familiar and the unfamiliar.

Can you see the signs of Immanuel, God with us?

Reflection Questions |

- King Ahaz and the people of Judah trembled “as trees of the forest shake before the wind.” When have you felt similarly afraid or uncertain? How was God present in that moment?
- God promised Ahaz a sign: a child called Immanuel, “God with us.” What “signs” of God’s faithfulness or nearness have appeared in your own life recently, perhaps in quiet or unexpected ways?
- What does it look like for the Episcopal Church to embody “God with us” through its witness and service in our troubled world?

Faith in Practice |

Each evening, name one moment when you noticed God’s presence that day: in creation, in a conversation, or in an act of kindness. Keep a short list or share these signs with a friend, your Bible study group, or others. At the end of the week, take a moment to reflect and thank God for small and big signs of divine nearness.

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