

“The Gift Not on Your List”

Isaiah 7:10-14; Matthew 1:18-25

Series: The Big Reveal – Clues to Christmas in Isaiah 1. God Is With Us

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It's that time of year when everyone in the family begins to make out a Christmas list. Have you ever received something strange, off the wall, something that would never make your top ten Christmas gift list? There's actually a website where people submit Christmas gift disasters they've received.

- Donna says her husband is not very good at picking out Christmas gifts, “I usually give the kids hints to pass on to him as to what I would like. But what do I get from my husband? An oil change for the car. He got what he wanted: an Ipad.
- A lady writes, “My boyfriend’s mother believes in quantity not quality. Every year she gives happy meal toys and sample sized shampoos. We’re used to it. The real surprise, however, was a pair of Celestial Seasonings travel mugs. That would be fine except for the fact I saw them in her pantry for the past four years. Worst of all they had stains on the inside. She didn’t even wash them. Yuck!
- One person wrote: “My grandmother gave me Barbie socks this Christmas, and I am 15 years old ... and a boy.”

What will be revealed under your tree on Christmas morning? I hope you receive everything on your list this year. Yet it's likely, some other things have been revealed this time of year - anxious or troubling situations you did not expect, you never requested, you didn't write down on your list:

- Perhaps you were let go from your job or you find the workplace so intolerable you need to update your resume and start looking.
- You're trying to buy most of the things on your kids' Christmas lists but it's getting harder each year to keep up with the list of bills.
- You never thought you'd be separated or divorced. But now the idea of celebrating the holiday alone feels almost unbearable.
- There's a relationship - someone close to you - that feels far away, tense, strained. Thanksgiving was tough. Christmas will be worse.
- The tests revealed something which makes the doctors concerned. It might be your loved one. It might be you. They reassure you. Yet you sense they are not too sure.

- A person you love has gone to be with the Lord. It may have been this year or a decade ago. You're thankful they are celebrating Jesus' birth with Him. But you wish they could be with you for one more Christmas.

It seems good and bad, joy and sorrow are revealed this time of year.

Christmas is the time for The Big Reveal – when God came down and revealed Himself to us in the most unlikely way of all: the body of a helpless infant. That holy night revealed “good news” and “great joy.” Yet the revelation of God’s Son came to a world that was wrapped up with evil and sorrow, danger, darkness and death just as it is today. A Big Reveal always comes after twists and turns, hints and clues. A Big Reveal is the unexpected A HA after the puzzling, unsolvable mystery. That is true of God’s Big Reveal of Jesus the Messiah. Hints to God’s plan are scattered throughout the Old Testament. Only when you meet Jesus do they all tie together and make sense. In this series we will focus on the powerful clues which come to us from the words of one special prophet: Isaiah. So many of his prophecies are fulfilled in Jesus that Isaiah has been called the fifth Gospel. Let me start with a little background.

You may remember King David and his son Solomon reign during Israel’s Golden Age about a thousand years before Jesus. Yet when Solomon’s son Rehoboam ascends to the throne, the kingdom split in two: the northern kingdom is called Israel and the southern kingdom is Judah. Like all siblings, sometimes they get along, sometimes they fight. Isaiah lives in a time when north and south are locked in a death struggle.

Fast forward to the year 735 before Christ. Ahaz, a descendant of David and king of Judah in the south, is afraid. On the far horizon, the dark gathering storm clouds of the Assyrian Empire are preparing to swoop down and consume all the tiny kingdoms of the Holy Land. Yet Ahaz has more immediate troubles. His two neighbors to the north are already marching up to capture Jerusalem, remove him from the throne and put their own puppet king in place. Pekah, the King of Israel forms an unholy alliance with Rezin, the King of Syria. Did you catch that? The northern tribes of Israelites side with the Syrians to attack their own brothers in the south. Talk about a family feud.

The hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind. (Isaiah 7:2)

Some of you have shared with me what it feels like to have someone you once trusted - your boss, boyfriend or girlfriend, sibling, spouse or parent - come at you. Like quaking aspen trees, Ahaz and all the people around him are terrified by this attack.

All but Isaiah. The prophet brings the frightened king a promise from the Lord,

Say to him, ‘Be careful, keep calm and don’t be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood – because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and of the son of Remaliah.’ (Isaiah 7:4)

This sounds like one of those posters they made in England before World War II: ‘Keep Calm and Carry On.’ Nowadays they are used to sell everything. Yet as Churchill said to

England, Isaiah says to Ahaz: Keep Calm and Call On God. ‘Don’t be afraid of these two charred, burned out torches. Rezin may be king of Syria and Pekah king of Israel. But I, the Lord, am the head of your kingdom Ahaz. They will never touch you. You must trust Me Ahaz. “If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all” (Isaiah 7:9).

Ahaz is still doubtful. So Isaiah gives a second promise to the king. “Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights” (Isaiah 7:11). What a golden opportunity! What a gift! The king can ask God anything. I’m sure you have a question you’ve always wanted to ask the Lord. But Ahaz refuses.

But Ahaz said, ‘I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test.’ (Isaiah 7:12)

It is not one of the gifts on his list. Now don’t be fooled by Ahaz’s false piety. He worships every other god and idol but the Lord. He builds altars to foreign deities and he even burned his son in the fire as an offering to one of the pagan gods (see 2 Kings 16). Isaiah sees right through him.

Then Isaiah said, “Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:13-14)

The Hebrew name Immanuel means “God with us.”

Since this is the first clue in our Big Reveal series, let me pause a minute and tell you how prophecy in the Bible works. Words of prophecy often have a *near meaning* and a *far meaning*. The near meaning refers to how the prophecy applies in the days of the prophet. It’s likely a child was born a few months later who was a sign that God was with them. Some scholars believe it was Ahaz’s own son Hezekiah, one of the greatest kings to reign in Jerusalem. Hezekiah became a living symbol that the Lord stands by His people in their darkest hour. God is with them and, just as He promised, the two kings from the north were defeated. Ahaz, the undeserving king, was saved.

Yet the near meaning of a prophecy is not the whole story. There is also a far meaning to this prophecy as well. The Apostle Peter in the New Testament explains this:

The prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. (I Peter 1:10-12)

So even the prophets who gave us hints about the Messiah didn’t know how they would be fulfilled or how all the clues would tie together. Why is this important? Sometimes I am asked, “If these prophecies are so obvious, why don’t Jewish people who read the same prophecies see Jesus?” Well, some Jewish people do. I’ve been blessed to baptize

several Jewish followers of Jesus. So why don't more Jewish people read the prophecies and see Jesus? Well, like us, most have to first see Jesus before they discover how He fulfills all the prophecies. And that, as Peter says, is the work of the Holy Spirit. When we look at the Jewish carpenter from Nazareth, the Spirit opens our eyes and suddenly all the prophecies fall into place, all the mysteries about the Messiah make sense.

What is the far meaning of Immanuel? Seven centuries after Ahaz and Isaiah, another man, another descendant of king David, is afraid. He is not a king but a commoner. He also receives a gift not on his list. His name is Joseph and the thing that makes him tremble is the news his fiancée, Mary, is pregnant. What should he do? Marry her and become the father of some other man's child? Divorce her and expose her to public shame and possibly death? Fold up his carpenter shop and leave town? He decides the only solution is to break off their engagement quietly. Maybe she can leave town and start a new life elsewhere.

But that night, an angel of the Lord speaks in his dream and reveals that the Child growing in her is truly a gift, not just for Joseph and Mary, but for the whole world.

Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. (Matthew 1:20-21)

When Joseph wakes, he remembers the ancient words taught him by his father, the promise given time out of mind and buried in his heart,

The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means "God with us") (Matthew 1:23)

Now the far meaning of these words is revealed. It *is* a sign that stretches from the highest heights and to the deepest depths. It does not just mean God would be *on* their side but that God would be *by* their side, that God will truly be with them in the flesh, in this baby. Ahaz, son of David, did not welcome this gift. He did not trust God. But Joseph, son of David, listens, trusts and obeys the Lord. Both are afraid. Yet one slams the door while the other opens it wide. And because Joseph trusts God, he is given the privilege of naming the baby: Jesus – it means 'the Lord Saves' "He will save His people from their sins."

When I play with my grandsons Ben and Isaac or my grandpup Winnie, I love to get down at their level, see the world from their point of view. I wrestle and roll around and feel again what it is like to live in a world where everything is so much bigger, heavier and larger than you, a world where you don't have the power to bend much to your will. Immanuel means that the awesome, powerful Almighty God gets down on our level, sees the world from our point of view, lives with nearly the same limitations we do. God is born as a baby, grows into adolescence and puberty, deals with hot and cold, work and exhaustion, heartache and grief, persecution, prejudice and oppression. And ultimately, Immanuel means that God is all with us and one with us in death. In fact, He

takes on all our suffering, sin and death on the Cross. You may be tempted at times to say, “God you don’t understand. You don’t know what I’m going through.” But He does understand. He does know. He’s tasted all of it. We need more than sympathy. We need more than someone to say, “Been there, done that.” We need salvation. We need God to be with us in the darkness and to lead the way out.

There is a piece of paper in your bulletin. Today, I invite you to write on it where you need God to be with you. When you come forward for communion, place that in the manger. Be like Joseph – open wide the door and trust the Lord to be with you and to lead you. Recently I received this letter which shares how you helped someone know God was with her:

Dear Pastor Doug,

I have been wanting to extend my extreme gratitude to you and Woodside – I truly can’t thank you enough for the loving support we received during a most painful time. I can’t imagine finding the strength to keep going without those relationships to share in God’s love and the opportunity to carry one another during times of difficulty. I will forever be grateful to Woodside as well for launching my daughter’s spiritual journey and her education into the depths of God’s love. I think of you all often and the incredible work you do in our community and beyond.

Much love and gratitude.

There may be a lot of unexpected troubles on your list this Christmas. But you will be able to handle them if you put Jesus on the top of your list.