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Knoxville, Tennessee  
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Hope: I Know It Was You, Fredo  
Isaiah 7:1-14

Our focus over the next few weeks is hope, our hope in Advent, Christ our hope even in the darkest days, as each week we look at an example of hopelessness in the Scripture of Israel, paired each week with this good news of “God with us” from the Gospel of Matthew. And this week, in looking at this text from the prophet Isaiah, we hear the good news of “God with us” in the midst of the darkness of betrayal. Will you pray with me?

_Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen._

This text in Isaiah is a cherished one in the Christian faith, perhaps most of all because Matthew in his Gospel points back to it and its words in v. 14, “Look, a virgin is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel,” as a clear sign of Jesus’ identity as the fulfilment of Scripture and all of Israel’s longing for a deliverer, a Messiah. And what Matthew does is pick up this verse in Isaiah 7, holds it up next to the miraculous birth of Jesus to Mary, who was herself a virgin, and says, “Look, even in the Scriptures long ago, this thread was being woven as a part of God’s plan, a plan that is now before you in Christ Jesus. The coming of this child is the fulfilment of all the longing, all the hope, and also all the letdowns, all the disappointments in the story and Scripture of the Israel and their God, what we know as the Old Testament.

And I sense that, to truly grasp the importance and good news of Christ’s coming, in Advent we almost have to take on the hopes and longings, as well as the letdowns and disappointments of Israel in the Old Testament, in order to understand just how amazing Christ’s coming is.

We hear it in the prophets; we hear it in the psalms; we hear it in the Advent hymn “O Come, O Come Emmanuel”: “Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel,” but still I think we often miss it. And that’s too bad. Because it is truly a message of hope.

Far too often, I fear we conflate Christmas and Advent, when really they’re two different things. For whatever reason, I think we effectively start celebrating Christmas the day after Thanksgiving, and honestly there’s a lot of pressure to do so. The decorations get switched from pumpkins and turkeys to wreaths, garland, and lights, if they haven’t already, and we begin to be surrounded by bright signs of Christmas cheer—for four weeks. And it’s not the worst thing in the world for there to be a cultural mindset of goodwill and generosity running around for a few weeks of the year, but it can make us miss some of the power behind the true message of Christmas when we start celebrating too early. That ultimately is the underlying reason for a season like Advent, not a preemptive celebration, but a preparation for some pretty incredible claims in the Christian faith, perhaps chief among them being that in Christ’s birth, we proclaim the tangible, physical presence of God with us. The Incarnation. God in the flesh. “God with us.”

That proclamation of “God with us” isn’t just cheery news in a cheery season. It’s kind of the opposite. It’s desperate news in our darkest hour. There’s a reason why many, many years
ago, the church identified this season of the year as appropriate to celebrate Christ’s birth. You may not have been aware of this, but the Bible never actually specifies the date of Jesus’ birth, much less tell us it was December 25. But later on, the church thought to recognize, in the Northern Hemisphere at least, this season as quite literally the darkest time of the year, with the shortest days leading up to the solstice on December 21. But the good news is that in our darkest hour, the greatest light comes. And it is that hope that we embrace each year in the season of Advent, hope in our darkest hour.

In one of the many dark hours that faced the people of Israel over the course of its history, the backstory of this text in Isaiah 7 is pretty gut-wrenching, and the whole account’s honestly not all that satisfying if you read it by itself. It’s all about betrayal. And it’s hard for me to read it without thinking of Michael Corleone and The Godfather, Part 2.

If you’ve never seen it, The Godfather, Part 2, is the sequel to, you guessed it, The Godfather, Part 1. One of the best sequels ever made. Continues the story of the Corleone crime family, and a large part of the story in Part 2 follows the head of the family, Michael, who’s Al Pacino in the movie. Early on, Michael is almost killed, and he realizes that the man behind it was a business rival named Hyman Roth and, even more painful, that he’s been betrayed by someone in his household, but he doesn’t know who. So, he sets up trap after trap to try to figure out who it was that gave him up. Then later in the movie, he finds out that it was his very own brother, Fredo, who had betrayed him to Hyman Roth. Michael confronts Fredo at a New Year’s Eve ball, grabs him, kisses his brother, and says, and this part is awesome, “I know it was you, Fredo. You broke my heart. You broke my heart.”

Fredo runs away, and who’s to blame him? His brother’s a cold-blooded murderer. But later on, they come together again and appear to reconcile. But Fredo forgot something: his brother’s a cold-blooded murderer. And at the end of the movie, Michael orders one of his hitmen to execute Fredo while he’s out fishing. Betrayal takes its toll.

Betrayal is at the heart of this passage too. Three main players here. There’s King Ahaz of Judah. Ahaz is Michael Corleone. About two hundred years earlier, the kingdom of Israel had split and Judah is the southern kingdom, Israel is the northern kingdom. There’s King Pekah of northern kingdom of Israel. Pekah is Fredo. And there’s King Rezin of Aram, a rival kingdom to the north of Israel, modern day Syria. That’s Hyman Roth.

What those early verses in the passage are describing is that King Pekah, or Fredo, has made an alliance with King Rezin against Judah, against King Ahaz, and are trying to invade and take the capital Jerusalem. Now understand why that’s such a big deal. It’s not just political backstabbing. That happens all the time. This is different. This is one part of the people of God, siding with a foreign power specifically to conquer another part of the people of God.

And understandably, the people are heartbroken and terrified. The text in v. 2 says, “The heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.” This is Michael grabbing his brother Fredo and saying, “I know it was you, Fredo. You broke my heart. You broke my heart.”

That’s where betrayal leaves us, doesn’t it? Heartbroken. Shaking in the wind. There is no feeling that matches the trust of one you’ve held dear being shattered. Leaves you angry. Leaves you dejected. Leaves you stunned. Leaves you almost paralyzed. I know that some of you have felt this. Betrayed by a parent, betrayed by a child. Betrayed by a sibling, betrayed by a spouse. Betrayed by a friend, betrayed by a colleague. I know that some of you have felt this. Hard to pick yourself up from it. Hard to trust ever again. Leaves you heartbroken, shaking in the wind, hopeless.
And it is into that hopelessness that a sign of good news comes.

The prophet Isaiah goes to Ahaz once. Tells him not to worry about these allied kings. They will not stand for long. Only calls him to stand firm in faith. The prophet Isaiah goes to Ahaz again, this time inviting the king to ask for a sign. Kind of a strange thing for a prophet to do: invite the king to ask for a sign, but that’s what he does. Then after a bit of what I think is false piety on Ahaz’s part, Isaiah then tells him what the sign will be. V. 14 reads, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the virgin is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.” (I used the word “virgin” here in Isaiah. Some translations say “virgin,” others say “young woman.” How the Hebrew of this verse is translated is actually kind of controversial, so let’s talk if you want to know more about that.) The main point here, though, is not how that one word is translated, but that a sign is given that says, in the midst of this heartbreaking, gut-wrenching betrayal, a child will be born, and that birth will say, “God is with us.” That’s what Immanuel means. God is with us.

If only it were so easy. If only it were so easy just to say, “God is with us,” and all the pain and heartbreak of betrayal just melt away. But usually it doesn’t work like that. Betrayal takes its toll.

If you kept reading in Isaiah and also if you bounced over to 2 Kings 16 to read more about King Ahaz, you’d find it doesn’t work like that for him either. If we just read in Isaiah 7, we can get sucked into rooting for him, but you’d find that he’s not some Bible hero. He doesn’t go from here with newly inspired faith, stand tall against betrayal and trust the Lord. No. He himself makes his own alliance with an even more powerful foreign power, the Assyrian Empire. Then when the Assyrians destroy the northern kingdom of Israel, Ahaz then pays Assyria tribute and builds an altar to Assyria’s gods in the Temple in Jerusalem.

Similar thing with Michael Corleone. We can get sucked into rooting for him, into thinking he’s a good guy. Really, he’s a despicable guy. And he answers betrayal with more betrayal, and ends up a shell of the man he used to be.

The point is, betrayal takes its toll. And if we are caught in a spiral of answering betrayal with more betrayal, then we truly are hopeless.

The point is, in the midst of betrayal, a sign of hope was given, a sign that God is with us. And it was ignored. It was answered with false piety and more backstabbing.

But not now.

Just as Advent is as much about the fulfilment of all the hope and longing of the story and Scripture of Israel, it’s also the fulfilment of all the letdowns and disappointments too. And we find that here. When Matthew points back to Isaiah and says, “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” he’s not just trying to give evidence as to why Jesus is the Messiah or the fulfilment of prophecy. He’s pointing back to a time in Israel’s history when a sign of hope was given and ignored. But now an even greater sign is before us. A sign that’s not just a statement of God’s spiritual presence like a conscience or an angel on your shoulder, but the good news that God is with us in the flesh, born to Mary, a virgin, a sign that all the hope and heartbreak of betrayals past finally find their fulfilment here.

So friends, as we begin this Advent season, as we search what we deem to be the hopeless corners of our hearts, as we ourselves remember and consider the pain of betrayal, may you not dodge it with false piety and petty squabbling or answer it in kind with betrayal of your own. But instead may you find hope anew that there is a presence greater than the one that
betrayed you, than the one that left you, than the one that rendered you hopeless. A miraculous life, of a miraculous birth, born to save His people from their sins, God with us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.