

Isaiah 7:10-16  
Romans 1:1-7  
Matthew 1:18-25

Isaiah 7:10-16

<sup>10</sup>Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, <sup>11</sup>Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. <sup>12</sup>But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. <sup>13</sup>Then Isaiah said: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? <sup>14</sup>Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. <sup>15</sup>He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. <sup>16</sup>For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

It’s just a couple of days until Christmas. So, radio stations are playing innovative versions of familiar Christmas Carols, and television is showing special holiday re-runs. And when they have our attention they run commercials about what we should buy and give to our loved ones for Christmas. It works pretty well. I’m told there are a lot of companies that do a third of their annual business at Christmas time. “What do you want for Christmas?” has got to be the most asked question between Halloween and this Tuesday. And for the two weeks after that it will be the same question with a slight variation: “Did you get what you wanted for Christmas?”

What we want doesn’t have very much to do with Christmas. This morning’s Old Testament lesson is from Isaiah. It sums up the season perfectly. “The Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying ‘Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.’ But Ahaz said, ‘I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.’ Then Isaiah said: ‘Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted’.”

Isaiah does not say, “King Ahaz, tell God what you want.” He says, “King Ahaz, ask God what he wants you to have.”

King Ahaz was no fool. When Isaiah told him to ask for a sign, Ahaz responded, "I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test." Telling God what we want is practically a national pastime...but asking God what he wants for us to have – puts us on pretty thin ice.

If we ask, God might tell us. Then we'd *know*. Doubt can be a comfortable place. As long as we can claim we don't know what God wants for us, we have some place left to hide.

Isaiah told Ahaz to ask for a sign from God. Ahaz didn't want one.

Old Testament prophets were not known for the tolerance. Isaiah told Ahaz to stop trying God's patience and gave him a sign whether he wanted one or not. He said, "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign..." and he did.

That is the message of Christmas. Not that God wonders what you want. It is the breathtaking message that God is willing to tell you what you ought to have.

God will come into your life. Your life will be lived with God in it.

It is not clear that this is good news. (Ahaz certainly had his doubts.) "God is coming to tell us what he wants us to know!" Historically, that proclamation has never made anyone comfortable.

Ahaz refused to ask for a sign...and years later people were no more anxious for a sign from God. Joseph and Mary had not been praying for a pre-marriage baby. The shepherds were not standing around all night looking for angels. Herod was not pleased when wise men showed up out of nowhere asking about a baby.

The sign was God's idea and it threw everything into turmoil. It turned lives upside down. It changed everything.

No one asked, "What do you want?" God decided what we should have.

We would not be celebrating two thousand years later if the birth of Jesus had been according to the desires of Joseph or the shepherds.

If the people in the Christmas story had been asked what they wanted for Christmas, they would have come up with the first century equivalents of the colognes and rechargeable screwdrivers that we always use to answer the question of what we want for Christmas.

But it was God's sign. That added a permanence to the event. It was not in our hands. God did not ask us what we wanted. He told us how things would be.

We have heard cries for certainty. We tell God, "Send us a sign!" It is common to wish that we could be sure of what God wants for us. We ask, "How can we know God's will for our lives?"

But if the problems of this world were just people who were sincerely looking for God's will and dedicated their energy and wisdom to finding what God wanted them to do...but they made mistakes...If those were the problems of this world – this world wouldn't have many problems.

The complaint is that we can't know God's will. He won't give us a sign. But the situation is that we won't listen to what he says and we won't see the signs he gives.

A sinful humanity is not so much characterized by a frustrated seeking of God's will. It is much more seen sticking its fingers in its ears and shouting, "Leave me alone!"

Isaiah said, "Ask for a sign." Ahaz answered, "I don't want one." We are willing to do without a sign. We are willing to get along without knowing what God wants for us.

Our celebration of Christmas is like the rest of our lives – only more so. We make it a season about what we want. What seems best to us? What makes the most sense; what would be the easiest?

God has interrupted our plans. He has come to be part of our lives and our lives can be different. He lives with us. What does God want for you? He's willing to tell you. He's giving us signs all the time – whether or not we want them.

Have you recently heard a reference to something you did not know and could have learned more about? Did you see someone talking, but know that you were in the habit of disagreeing with people like that, so you didn't see any reason to listen? Did you have a chance to buy something

for someone in your family that was not needed and the money could be better spent in other ways? Have you seen someone who has made you angry and you could have decided to forgive? They were all signs from God.

God does not hesitate to speak – for all our proclamation that we don't want signs. He breaks into our lives with signs straight from heaven. Every chance we have to learn something new. Every time we have a chance to refuse to believe gossip. Every time we hear about someone who is hungry. God is giving us a sign. God is coming into our lives ready or not and telling us what he wants our lives to be.

Every chance we have to forgive someone who has been wrong, every chance we have to worship God, every chance to make ourselves better...these are nothing less than signs from God.

Ahaz said he didn't need a sign; he wouldn't dream of putting God to the trouble. But God gave him one anyway.

God would come into the lives of his people without an invitation.

Jesus was born in the midst of people saying, "No, don't bother. We're getting along all right. This isn't exactly what we want, God."

The celebration of Christmas...what makes it the overwhelming joy that doesn't have any other explanation...is not God's ability to guess what we want out of life – and then give it to us.

It is his choice to come into our lives and make them what he wants them to be.

What do we want for Christmas? Not nearly as much as God has chosen to give us.