

## FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT

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

*Immanuel, God with Us*

The so-called “Reverend” Anne Fowler, a priestess in the Episcopal Church, writes in an autobiographical article entitled “Abortion as a Moral Choice”:

At another point, a few years later, I did have an abortion. I was a single mother, working and pursuing a path to ordination in the Episcopal Church. The potential father was not someone I would have married; he would have been no better a candidate for fatherhood than my daughter's absent father. The timing was wrong, the man was wrong, and I easily, though not happily, made the decision to terminate the pregnancy.

I have not the slightest regret about either of these decisions, nor the slightest guilt. I felt sorrow and loss at the time of my abortion, but less so than when I'd miscarried some years earlier. Both of my choices, I believe, were right for me and my circumstances: morally correct in their context, practical, and fruitful in their outcomes.

That's right, after getting pregnant as a seminarian by a man with whom she had no interest in having even a serious relationship, let alone marrying, Anne Fowler decided to have an abortion in order to continue her studies for what the Episcopal Church considers ordination. And she has not the slightest regret about it. It was the right thing for her, she claims, and, at least in her view, for God.

A certain bartender Moe once said, “I've done stuff I'm not proud of, and the stuff I am proud of is disgusting.” Too often those words fit us a little too well, but one would have a hard time arguing they didn't fit Ahaz perfectly, a man who shared Anne Fowler's train of thought in religious matters. Here's how we're introduced to King Ahaz in Holy Scripture, in 2 Kings 15:

***Ahaz was twenty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem. And he did not do what was right in the eyes of the LORD his God, as his father David had done, but he walked in the way of the kings of Israel. He even burned his son as an offering, according to the despicable practices of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel. And he sacrificed and made offerings on the high places and on the hills and under every green tree.***

Let's review: ***“He burned his son as an offering.”*** Maybe you weren't listening: ***“He burned his son as an offering.”*** Nice guy, huh. Sure wish I could have a beer with that Ahaz. I bet he has some stories to tell. Oh, wait: ***“He burned his son as an offering.”*** Way to be, Ahaz. Way to be. Like Anne Fowler, he committed a shameful and murderous act and had the gall to claim he did so in service to God, or, whatever it was that he, like Anne Fowler, had concocted as god. In both cases, the god they were really serving was themselves.

Ahaz was a wicked king if there ever were one. An idolater extraordinaire, ***“He sacrificed and made offerings on the high places and on the hills and under ever green tree.”*** In other words, you'd better put a fence around your backyard, or Ahaz was going to sacrifice to an idol in it. Wherever he went, idolatry followed. And, oh yeah, let's not forget: ***“He burned his son as an offering.”*** I love you too, Dad.

So, knowing what we know about Ahaz, how do you think things were going in Israel? Got an answer? All right, if you answered “good,” were you listening? ***“He burned his son as an offering.”*** Judah was caught in a tag team match without a partner, as its enemies teamed up in a scheme to wipe Judah off the map like a glutton wiping barbeque sauce from his jowly face after devouring a rack of ribs. And Ahaz was shaking in his boots. Isn't that what you want your commander in chief doing when you're about to go toe to toe with an enemy: shaking in his boots?

And so God sends Isaiah. ***“Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint... If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.”*** And He urges Ahaz

to test Him. ***“Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.”***

If an idol had spoken, Ahaz would have listened, but not to the only true God. The only true God should listen to him. ***“I will not ask for a sign,”*** he replies, probably thinking that was the pious response. Sometimes the greatest obstacle to our piety is our piety, that is, what we think will impress God. But faith doesn't say what it thinks God wants to hear. Faith says what God says He wants to hear. If God says to ask for a sign, faith asks for a sign, just as if God says to eat bread and wine for forgiveness, to be baptized for eternal life, faith stuffs its mouth, drinks deeply, and splashes about in the water, for these are God's signs. God Himself had come to Ahaz, this wretched, wicked, incompetent king, and God Himself had promised deliverance from what seemed a hopeless situation, and Ahaz is not content to rejoice and to do what we are all tempted to do in the first place: to ask for a sign.

How often aren't we willing to listen to everything but the one true God. One's god is whatever he trusts above all, but how often do we turn to the true God in those "above all" moments? We'll listen to this celebrity or that politician, this TV therapist or that self-proclaimed guru, we'll shake every magic 8-ball we can get our hands on, but the only true God, what does He know?

***“Test me,”*** God begs, and we smile and nod like he's some sort of street person, eager for Him to pass so we can get back to grasping about for something that might really work, might really bring us peace, might really offer wholeness. Even as He seals His promise with signs, with Sacraments, we go through the motions muttering faux-pious clichés, our mind latched all the while upon our worries. Everyone has a god, even the atheist. Our god is what we trust above all. The atheist trusts his own reason and understanding above all. What do you trust above all? Whom do you trust above all? Does your God fill the heavens or your back pocket?

The LORD had listened enough to Ahaz. ***“You're getting a sign,”*** He says, and what a sign it is. God would deliver Judah from its enemies in a most amazing way. As a virgin does not expect to conceive a child, so also Judah could not conceive how God was about to save them from the hands of greater enemies. And that was not all of it. God would not only deliver them from Aram and Israel. God would deliver them from their sins.

Ahaz was a real piece of work. ***“He burned his son as an offering.”*** But Ahaz was not the only one to sacrifice His Son. Our heavenly Father has done the same that you might never burn like Ahaz' child. Immanuel, our Jesus, became ***“God with us”*** not just to stop by for coffee cake and say hello, but to give His life according to the will of His Father, not for His Father's good, but for your good, not on account of His Father's selfishness, but on account of His own selflessness.

***“You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”*** And you are His people, and He has saved you, not for your sins, but from your sins, even the worst, even the shameful and murderous, so don't explain them away; confess them.

God doesn't want from you what you think He wants. God wants from you what He says He wants. He wants you to listen. He wants you saved. So listen and rejoice in His sign, an answer to Ahaz' unbelief and the very basis of our faith, a Child, born of a Virgin, flesh and blood in a manger, a Savior, the only Child, the only Son ever sacrificed according to God's will and, thanks be to God, not for His own benefit, but for your salvation. ***“So be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint,”*** for God is with you. Amen.