

### THIRD MIDWEEK ADVENT SERVICE

*Isaiah 7:10-15*

#### Immanuel

Synod's last bulletin insert wasn't good. Most of Lutheranism is in shambles and isn't Lutheran at all. Half our congregation isn't here with any regularity. Attendance is up, but will likely drop as my honeymoon period ends. Many Wisconsin Synod churches are struggling to maintain what they have, let alone grow. Why delude ourselves with the hope of a better future?

Isaiah writes, "*The Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.*" Do you know what the future looked like at that time? Israel was up a bad stream without a paddle. Their destruction seemed inevitable. Only a remnant of believers remained. The leadership was weak and ineffectual. The prophet Isaiah faced unrelenting resistance throughout his ministry, and, according to tradition, was sawed in half. That is hardly a grand indicator of hope, in fact, if one of the area pastors had recently been sawed in half, I highly doubt I would still be hanging around here. I like both my halves too much for that. There was little if any reason for hope.

We talked last Monday in Bible class about how times have changed, but not people and their predisposition to sin. Yes we can sin more effectively and more extensively now than ever before, but sin is still sin. Now we shoot missiles rather than beating each other over the head with clubs. We steal identities instead of breaking into houses. We click onto websites instead of hiding magazines. We fly planes into buildings instead of burning crosses. My how we have progressed! Even worse, when we reap the harvest of disobedience that we have sown, we grumble against God, as if He were responsible for our poor decisions. We are just like Old Testament Israel. Our self-imposed situation all too often seems hopeless; but, alas, there is still blue on the altar.

Ahaz just wanted deliverance from Syria; that was what he was concerned with. He'd ignored the Lord for years, but the Lord nevertheless answered, and, as is usual, addressed a lot bigger need than deliverance from Syria. Yes, God would deliver Israel from Syria, but that was small potatoes. God was going to deliver them from something even bigger, something even more deadly. God was going to deliver them from sin and from death itself. God could've given Ahaz any sign, but He chose to prophesy a virgin giving birth to a child named Immanuel, God with us.

We too have specific situations from which we want God to deliver us, yet God, as He did with Ahaz, desires to get to the heart of the matter, to the root of our problems. He still points us to Immanuel, born of a virgin. What is wrong in your life right now? How insurmountable do your problems seem? Look to Immanuel; look to the virgin's Son, God with us. No matter what is wrong, God always looks to the source, and the source is always sin, which has gotten in the way of our relationship with Him. Turn to Immanuel. Rejoice in Immanuel. Live with Immanuel, and let those lesser troubles fall into place. Left to our own devices, we often lose perspective in spiritual matters, but when we look into the manger, big problems become small, and the Solution, wrapped in swaddling clothes, becomes apparent.

God is with us. He is with us in His Word and in the Sacraments. He dwells in us by faith. I do not know what your Syria may be today, throwing your life into confusion, but I do know that God's answer is always bigger than our problems, because God's answer is Immanuel, God with us, now and forever. Put your God to the test. Ask Him for a sign, and find it, wrapped and set out for you to discover on Christmas Day. Come, Lord Jesus, come. Be God with us that we may be with God. Amen.