

GOD'S UNIMAGINABLE SUPRISES

AN ADVENT RESOURCE FROM GCORR

WEEK 4 - TRUST GOD IN TIMES OF CHALLENGE, STRUGGLE, & CHANGE

ISAIAH 7:1-2, 10-16

NOTE TO PASTORS/PREACHERS: Because this Scripture include a string of names, you may want to read from a version or translation of the Bible that is more colloquial. For this reason, we offer it from two sources.

Isaiah 7:1-2, 10-16 (New Revised Version) - "In the days of Ahaz son of Jotham son of Uzziah, king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah son of Remaliah of Israel went up to attack Jerusalem, but could not mount an attack against it. When the house of David heard that Aram had allied itself with Ephraim, the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind...

"Again, 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 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 7:10-16 (from The Message by Eugene Peterson) - "During the time that Ahaz son of Jotham, son of Uzziah was king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah son of Remaliah of Israel attacked Jerusalem, but the attack sputtered out. When the Davidic government learned that Aram had joined forces with Ephraim (that is, Israel), Ahaz and his people were badly shaken, They shook like trees in the wind."

"GOD spoke again to Ahaz. This time GOD said, 'Ask for a sign from me, your GOD. Ask anything. Be extravagant. Ask for the moon!' But Ahaz said, 'I'd never do that. I'd never make demands like that on GOD!' So Isaiah told Ahaz, 'Then listen to this, government of David! It's bad enough that you make people tired with your tired, timid hypocrisies, but now you're making GOD tired. So our Great GOD is going to give you a sign anyway. Watch for this: A girl who is presently a virgin will get pregnant. She'll bear a son and name him Immanuel (which means GOD-With-Us). By the time the child is twelve years old and able to make moral decisions, the threat of war will be over. Relax! Those two kings that have you so worried will be out of the picture.'"

SERMON STARTERS

NOTE TO PREACHER: Since this is complex story, start by first reading this background statement to your listeners. (See paragraphs below.) Make sure to read the Biblical text(s) a few times in advance so that you are comfortable with pronunciation of names and places,

This Biblical story takes place in 8th Century B.C.E, against the backdrop of international political conflict. Ahaz is the king of Judah. Pekah, the king of Israel and Rezin, the King of Aram, are plotting to make war on Ahaz and Judah. Now Israel and Judah used to be part of the same kingdom during the time of King Solomon, but they split after Solomon's death. And Pekah and Rezin are mad because Ahaz won't join with them to fight another kingdom, so they decide, "We're just going to conquer Judah and take it over."

Even though the house of Judah is King David's lineage, and we know that Jesus will come from that line, Ahaz doesn't fully trust that that heritage can really save him. He is really in a power position, yet he complains and laments and is so scared that he is trembling, and he's making his people afraid as well. Instead of trusting the God who has always stood with them Ahaz looks for another kingdom to join him and help fight Pekah and Rezin. So God tells Isaiah, "Go and talk to Ahaz!" And that's where we are as this story begins.

Next, read the text aloud.

- Mistrust and unbelief may cause even people with great power to resist listening to God. Ahaz is king of the household of David, which is a kingdom known for being aligned with the God of Israel. Their God brought them out of slavery in Egypt, and formed an eternal alliance with them through their ancestors Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob, Moses and Miriam, etc. Here, God says to Ahaz, "Ask me anything! I've got your back! You will not fail." Yet, Ahaz and the people of Judah are afraid to be open to new possibilities, to rely on God's word, and to move forward on God's agenda. These are arguably the most powerful people in the world, yet they still don't trust God to abide through these latest political changes, that God will be there. The good news of Advent is that God is faithful as we follow God's leading for our corporate, communal and individual lives. So, we are called to walk forward in faith, following Jesus (God-with-us). And as we give ourselves over to the One sent by God to teach us a new way of being—as Christians trust that our salvation comes as we follow and seek to emulate the Loving, Open, Forgiving, Uplifting, All-People-Love Christ, then the old ways of

power-mongering and fear of others might just give way to peace-mongering and joy-mongering.

- Look forward to new possibilities, even in times of fear, struggle and change. There is a reason that a car's windshield is much wider and larger than a rearview mirror. It's because we need a greater vision to get us where we're going than what is need to review we're we've been. We can learn from the past and celebrate where we've been and who we've been, but God is always calling us forward. The past may inform our walk, teach us what we got right and remind us what we've gotten wrong, so that we can go forward in faith. Ahaz has come from people whom God had delivered over and over again. But instead of looking in the rearview mirror and saying, "Look how far God has brought us," Ahaz was immobilized by fear, and stuck in the middle of the road, shaking at the wheel with his eyes shut tight. We've been there as individual Christians and we've been there as a church and even as a denomination. We've taught ourselves to fear the unknown, to be silent when God calls us to speak out, to speak uncomfortable truths in our homes, workplaces, Sunday schools and worship, because we don't know what is coming down the road if we veer from the familiar. But Advent is about new possibilities and new beginnings, and this Sunday we light the candle of Joy—joy that God is still blessing us and sending signs and wonders and inviting us to be part of the new thing led by that tiny child who has come to make all things new. And while we're all a little bit Ahaz, the good news is that we're also a little bit truth-telling Isaiah, a little bit the unassuming Mary whose about to birth the Savior, and we're all participants with God in moving forward with faith, hope, love, peace and joy. With God our stuck become unstuck, following the Christ who bids us forward into a new Christian year and a new Christian purpose.

CHILDREN'S SERMONETTE

THEME: F.R.O.G. (Fully Rely on God)

Bible verse: "You, God, are my fortress, my God on whom I can rely." (Psalm 59:9-10)

Materials needed:

- A stuffed frog or large drawing of a frog OR miniature toy frogs for each child (i.e., those available for order from www.orientaltrading.com)
- The a cut-out frog with memory verse, one for each child, which they may color and take with them

Keep your stuffed frog and frog toys and/or the coloring sheets hidden until all the children are gathered. Then bring out your stuffed frog and hold it out toward the children. Or distribute toy frogs to all children. Read Psalm 59:9-10; then say:

"Who knows what this is/these are? (Pause for responses) Right! It's a frog! Did you know that frogs can help us remember something very special about God? Each letter in the word frog—F. R. O. G.—can remind us to fully rely on God. Can you say that with me? Fully Rely On God. The word "fully" means every day in every way; "rely" means to trust and believe.

When we fully rely on God, we let God care of stuff that is too big for us to handle on our own. If you can't reach the top shelf at home, who do you ask to help you? (Wait for their responses) And when you're at school and you don't know the answer to a question, whom do you ask? (Pause for responses)

Yes! In the same way, God helps us when we need help or guidance or to figure out new things. God sees and know when we do good things and God cheers for us. God is with us when we're in trouble. God is there when we make a mistake and want to do better. All we have to do is pray to God and believe that God loves all of us and everybody in the whole world, and God wants us to love each other and depend on each other. God sent Jesus to us to show us how to live in a way that makes God smile and that makes God's world better. So, ask we get closer to celebrating Christmas, let's also celebrate that we can Fully Rely On God, OK! Pray with me (Pray each phrase, and ask the children to repeat after you as you read):

Dear God,

Thank you for the good news that Jesus is coming
Help us to know that we can rely on you in all things
And help us to be people who act and love like Jesus
We trust you and love you,
AMEN!

Here's a FROG toy/coloring sheet for you. Take it home, color it, and hang it up until Christmas to remind yourself that we can Fully Rely on God. (Distribute coloring sheets)