

The Sign of God's Favor

Isaiah 7:14

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace from our Christ our Lord.

In many of video screen all around, all kinds of Christmas movies are playing during these days. Some are romantic in nature, others as I like them, involve lots of action, especially those related to Santa Clause in his elves. In many of those movies, there is a current theme, the source of energy or power for Santa, his Elves and his machinery, including his reindeer and sleigh could only exist if people everywhere and wherever still believed in Santa. From a young girl and her brother helping Santa recover his red hut in Christmas Chronicles, or a group of people singing “Santa is Coming to Town” so Santa’s sleigh can fly again and escape a police chase in “The Elf” movie, just among many.

Believing in Santa points to the fact that people do believe in something. But that something must be seen, must be touched, that could be worshiped in many and various ways, and that could inspire back into people something magical and good spirit. And Santa is that something. Believing in something, reflects the spiritual need of the human being. For that human being is wired to believe and trust in something spiritual, in something beyond our human capacity. Now, if that which we are supposed to believe in is in our own perception, absent, then we are forced to look for that something somewhere else.

Now you and I know that it is God who we need to depend on. But, I think it is important to recognize that sometimes we, the people of God

have often experienced life in a way that makes us think God is absent. Most of us, at some point or another, have wondered whether God is really with us. We face great difficulties, and we wonder if God cares. We encounter things we can't explain or understand, and we wonder if God really exists. We cry out to God on our knees but hear nothing in response other than our own sighs. We toil through life, never experiencing much of a spiritual high or low, and we begin to question if God is with us. With a few exceptions, the people of God have often experienced life in a way that makes them think God is absent.

That's why faith in the only true God fades, but faith in that which we like to pursue, sort of believe in to exist, that is what we begin to follow. It's been like that since ancient times, humankind has been developing other ways to still have that spiritual connection to something, so they have devised religions with their respective idols to worship, supposing them to be a manifestation of God. In the Old Testament, you have Baal, you have a golden Calf, then you have eastern religions, western religions, that's how Santa Clause has become to being.

But here we are, this is the last Sunday of the season of Advent, in a week we will be celebrating the birth of Jesus, his birth by a virgin. We are excited, I hope! At the announcement that Jesus has come to live with us. And today's Old Testament reading of Isaiah, reminds us who this child is, and by reminding us of what this child's birth means for us: the sign of God's favor.

A Sign? Do we need a sign from God? Well, we need the confirmation that God is with us, especially when he seems absent.

That's the situation the Prophet reveals to us today. The people of his time, the nation of Judah, and their king were in desperate need of a sign from the Lord, proof that God will be with them in that time of crisis.

This is their situation: they were facing two strong enemies, both from the north. It was their brother nation of Israel, and Syria, were coming to attack it (7:1). King Ahaz and the people of Judah were not certain that they would be able to defeat these enemies. Early in verse 2, the prophet describes the reaction of the people and says: "...the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind." And they weren't sure God was with them to help them be protected.

But God, through the prophet Isaiah, came to Ahaz to assure him that these enemies would not be able to defeat them. God told him, "...It shall not come to pass." (7:7). God called upon Ahaz and the people of Judah to stand firm in their faith (7:9).

But could they trust God's Word? The enemies looked so powerful, so impressive. Would God really keep his promise? Could they be certain that God would help them overcome their enemies? A sign of God's favor, a sign of God's love and protection, would certainly help them overcome their fears and anxieties.

We, too, have enemies that threaten us. Our unbelief is one of them, and the major one. Our misguided spiritual walk, including our spiritual inventions so we can have some peace. Besides that, we have the world around us. Wars, pandemic, endemics. Crime and violence seem to be all around us. An uncertain economy threatens our financial security. Family problems threatens the unity of the Family core, the future of our children seem lost because of the increased decaying of our moral values, and

because of what sometimes it seems, God is absent from us. Is God real and is he with us? We need a sign, yes! A sign that God is with us really, a sign that God loves us, a sign that he will help us and take care of us, a sign that even if everything falls apart God will keep us steadfast.

If all the things around us aren't threatening enough, our sin also pose to us a terrible danger. We know that we have sinned against God's holy Word again and again and again—we can think of countless examples. We begin to worry that our sin will destroy our eternal future. We need a sign, a sign that God still loves us in spite of our sin, a sign that God forgives us.

God has come to us through his prophets and apostles and made promises to us. He has promised that he would be with us always (Mt 28:20). He has promised to work all things together for good (Rom 8:28). He has promised not to give us more than we can bear (1 Cor 10:13).

But can we trust God to keep his promises? Will he really do all these wonderful things that he's promised? Will God be faithful to his Word? A sign would help us to believe and be at peace. A sign would help us too.

God was ready to give Ahaz a sign, if he only would ask for it. God understood how helpful a sign would be for his people, and he gave Ahaz carte blanche to choose it. Incredibly, Ahaz refused God's offer: "Ahaz said, 'I will not ask; I will not put the lord to the test'" (v 12).

Ahaz, a hardened unbeliever, wanted no part of God's help. He'd already decided what *he* was going to do to bale *himself* out of the crisis: he would seek an alliance with the even more dangerous and more wicked Assyrians. As it turned out, they did come to his aid, destroying both Israel and Aram, but soon after also turned on Judah.

Never mind Ahaz' denial! God's kindness wouldn't be put off by the king's foolishness. "Then he said, "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you weary men, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign' " (v 13-14a).

If Ahaz didn't want a sign to reassure him in the there-and-then, God would still do one better: give a sign for the ages, one that would reassure his people in each one's own here-and-now. God's sign of his love for us is this: Isaiah announced, "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his Immanuel" (v 14) "God with us."

The sign was, of course, fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. Born of Mary, Jesus is God in human flesh, God come down from heaven to live and dwell among us.

The birth of Jesus is then the sign of God's favor. Jesus is the sign that God loves us and will take care of us. The birth of Christ is the sign. Jesus is the sign, the proof of God's love and forgiveness and faithfulness!

Dr. John Rosen, a psychiatrist, was known for his work with schizophrenics. Instead of staying detached from his patients, Dr. Rosen moved into the ward with them. His bed was by their beds. He lived the life they had to live. He loved them. If they didn't talk, he didn't talk either. It was as if his being there communicated something that they hadn't experienced in years—somebody loved them. But he did something else too. He put his arms around them and hugged them. He held these unattractive, unlovable people and loved them back into life. Often the first words they spoke were simply "thank you."

This is what Jesus did at Christmas. He moved into the ward with us. His bed is among our beds. He hugs us, loves us, and leads us to a restored life. Jesus communicates to us that we are loved.

Yet, we still doubt it, don't we? That's why people still believe in Santa Clause, or other religions for that matter. Let's not be fooled no more. As you see, through the Sign, Jesus Christ, God gives other signs too. Baptism and Holy Communion. As you see Baptism and Holy Communion are signs of God's gracious disposition toward us. Tell of his presence among us. That God is not missing as we think he is. They are "signs and testimonies of God's will toward us" that "awaken and confirm faith" in us (AC XIII 1–2).

Feeling unsure and lost today? If you are baptized, remember that there, God has claimed you to be his child. In baptism God gave you newness of life. This life manifests itself in sacrificial service to others—both to fellow believers in the Church and to those in need outside the Church. When the everyday lives of God's people are shaped by their Baptism into Christ, the watching world sees the hidden presence of God. God's presence in the world today is made known through his people as they love and serve one another. And when life gets tough in Holy Communion, and the continual preaching of his word you are strengthen and nourished.

Is God missing? Now, but we are, we miss the point of Christmas at times. We miss the point of baptism and communion. Yet they are a sign of God's presence in the bigger Sign, Christ.

Because God gave us a sign and fulfilled it, our hearts can now be at peace. Worry and anxiety do not have to be our daily companions. God loves us! He is with us! Our sins are forgiven! Heaven will be our eternal home! God will take care of us and help us make it through life in this oftentimes difficult world! Jesus is the sign that all these things are so.

In just a few days we will celebrate Christmas. But what will we really be celebrating? We will not just be celebrating a few days off from work or school! We will not just be celebrating getting together with family or receiving presents. What we will really be celebrating is the sign God gave us of his love and protection and favor, so that all of us who struggle to make it through life in this world filled with sin and pain and suffering could find hope and reassurance in the sign that God has fulfilled: "

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." (v 14).

This sign is how we know that God is with us and will keep all his promises. May this sign lead you to truly celebrate Christ's birth this year! In Jesus' name. Amen!