

I Believe in Love: Daring to Trust God

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- [0 : 0 0] Good morning. This morning I'm reading from the book of Isaiah, chapter 7, verses 10 through 14. Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.
- But Ahaz said, I will not ask, I will not put the Lord to the test. Then Isaiah said, Hear now, you house of David.
- Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Emmanuel.
- And from the book of Matthew, chapter 1, verses 18 through 25. This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about.
- His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph. But before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph, her husband, was faithful to the law and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.
- [1 : 2 5] But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.
- She will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet.
- The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and they will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us. When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.
- But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son and he gave him the name Jesus. This is the word of our Lord. Thanks be to God.
- So let's pray together. Almighty and gracious God, we are indeed moved by your grace today. Grateful for the ways in which you have already touched each and every one of our hearts.
- [2 : 3 9] And Lord, as we come to you in this moment, continue to pour yourself into us afresh. Come to each of us in a new way and give us what you know we need. In Jesus' most holy name we pray and ask.
- Amen. Amen. So as I said, week two of I Believe Even When. And our focus, when you think about those four themes that we talk about during Advent, we're used to hearing about peace and joy and hope.
- Today's focus is love. And when we talk about the importance of God's love in each of our lives, most of us kind of get it. We're like, well, of course that's important.
- But today, what we want to do is push this in a little more practical way. Push this in a way that hopefully will help us take a step and be in our most close, intimate, and shall we say faithful relationship with God.

Now, to help us get into that, we're going to be talking about two people today. You heard Louis read two different stories. The first is about a man named Ahaz.

[3 : 46] The second is about a man named Joseph. The Joseph story we're probably more familiar with. Ahaz, not as much. So we'll spend some time on him. But to help all of this make a little more sense, let me tell you a little story first.

So the other day, I'm out visiting some folks in the church. And I'm leaving one place, and I've got to get to this place I've never been before.

So I did what all good people do in 2023. I asked Siri how to get there. Now, I kind of had an idea where I was headed. And so I'd already kind of in my brain thought, oh, I'm going this way.

So I get in the car, and I get to the edge of the parking lot, and Siri says, turn right. And I'm like, that's not where I thought I was going. Now, how many of you have had this argument with your GPS?

When it starts to tell you, you got this way you want to go in your own head, but it says, go this way. So I decided to take the leap of faith.

[4 : 54] Siri, you know, she and I have had our issues. But let's put it this way. But I decided I'm going to trust her today. And sure enough, I turned right. And it turns out, she was good on this one.

That this was a whole lot faster than the way I'd originally planned. In fact, it was only a couple of turns. And so I tell you that to help you get to this place, which is when you've got your mind made up, and you've already started thinking about the way you want to go, especially when it comes to how to live your life and your closest life with God, the challenge for you is how much of this is you've made up your mind, what it's supposed to look like, as opposed to the direction that God is giving you.

Because that's what's happening in each of our stories today. So let's talk about Ahaz. Because Ahaz, as I said, is not really a familiar person to most folk.

Ahaz is the king of Judah. Okay? Remember, there's a time before Jesus where the kingdom of Israel was split into a northern kingdom and a southern kingdom.

So Ahaz is the king of what's called the southern kingdom, which is known as Judah. Now, here's Ahaz's problem. There are two countries that are aligned with each other.

[6 : 20] And they are creating all kinds of problems for Judah. Okay? Now, there's also a third country. Ahaz is thinking that if I align myself with the third country, then I should be able to stave off the problems from the other two.

Okay? Now, into this mess steps the prophet Isaiah. Because Isaiah is bringing Ahaz a word from God.

And Isaiah is telling Ahaz, essentially, do not put your faith in an earthly kingdom. You need to trust God to protect the country.

Stay faithful to God. That's his message. And when Isaiah goes, he is saying, you know, God has already done this.

You need to trust God. Okay? But, as you heard Louis read, Ahaz says, well, I'm not sure I want to put God to the test.

[7 : 26] Now, skip the piece. Hang on a second. So, what happened here is that when Isaiah shows up, if Ahaz is kind of wishy-washy about whether or not he should believe it, Isaiah tells him.

He's like, ask God for a sign. God is willing to do something to help reassure you. that God can be trusted in this. That's when Ahaz says, well, I'm not sure I want to put God to the test.

And Isaiah says, look, because you are in this particular place, God is going to give you the sign anyway. And that's when we hear that verse that many of us are familiar with.

The virgin will then conceive a son, and you shall call his name Emmanuel. That's the sign. Okay? Now, Ahaz being Ahaz.

A little background on Ahaz. He's 20 when he becomes king. Okay? He's king with his father for a little while, but then he becomes king by himself. Ahaz, shall we say, is not the most effective leader.

[8 : 39] Okay? He's also not terribly faithful. So, even with this reassurance, he decides to enter into that third alliance anyway.

To put it bluntly, it doesn't work out so well. Okay? He ends up desecrating the temple. He ends up participating in some pagan worship practices, and the kingdom is still having all kinds of problems with all these other countries.

And eventually, it turns into something much more serious. Okay? Fortunately, his son gets his act together, but that's another story for another day. Now, the reason why I tell you that is I want you to contrast that with the journey that's probably more familiar to all of us, which is Joseph, Mary's husband.

Okay? Most of us have heard that story before, of how Joseph, when he's confronted with Mary's pregnancy, isn't sure what to do.

Remember what it feels like to Joseph. Okay? Because at this point in the story, Joseph thinks his fiancée is either unfaithful to him or lying to him or both.

[9 : 56] Okay? Now, he has a decision to make. And as you hear in the story, he can either accuse her publicly, which will lead to her death.

Okay? But as you hear in the passage, it says he had decided to divorce her quietly. Okay? But God shows up, as we are familiar.

The angel shows up and tells him what's actually happening. And because he has this interaction with God, Joseph decides to step into his role in the story.

Now, contrast those two responses. Right? The challenge here, though, is that whether we look at Ahaz's story or whether we look at Joseph's story, you can see how it connects to our own story.

See, because the problem here is that if we are trying to live our best life of faith, if we are trying to walk as closely as God as we can walk, then how do we actually get ourselves into this place where we can receive those messages and then be in our best relationship with God?

[11 : 24] Because those messages show up and we question them or a lot of us think that we don't get those messages. So how do we solve this problem?

Especially if we've already gotten in our head this is what it's supposed to look like, I'm going this way. Because that is where many of us get caught.

So let's unpack that a little bit because that's really the key. So if you do want to walk more closely with God, if you want to be in your most intimate relationship with God, there's a couple of things you can do.

But here's going to be the rub. They will all ask for something. Right? So here's first. The first thing you want to do is if you want to receive a couple of these messages, is you've got to be willing to ask God directly.

A lot of folks don't want to do that. Remember what Jesus taught us. He says, ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find.

[12 : 38] Knock and the door will be opened. So if you're at a moment in your life and you're wondering, well God, what am I supposed to do? If you're at a moment in your life and you want to see God's movement in your life and say, help me with this, have you asked directly?

Because if you're not willing to ask directly, then that's kind of part of the issue. Right? And here's why. We know that God knows everything.

It's not that you're telling God secrets when you ask your question. It's not that God was sitting there, you drop this in God's life and God goes, ooh, I wasn't expecting that. The issue is what it does to you when you're willing to humble yourself and open yourself and trust God enough to actually say, God, I need your help.

That has an impact on you. Like I said, God knows what's going on. The challenge is, is can you open yourself up enough to say, God, I really do need your help with this?

Not just let the words come tumbling out of your mouth, but to really ask for God's help. To seek it honestly and transparent.

[14 : 07] Remember, that does something to you. You're not just giving information to God. Second thing is this, is you got to be willing to persist. So, we're going to talk about some unnamed disciple right now and let's just say this unnamed disciple has worked herself into a place of asking.

So, she says, God, I need your help with this. And so, maybe 10 seconds passed and lo and behold, there was no visit from an angel.

The skies didn't open up. There was no burning bush. So, she has decided that God is not going to answer her prayer. That maybe nothing's going to happen.

Well, I tried, so God didn't care. Friends, if we really hope to be in this kind of relationship with God, then we have to be willing to persist in listening.

I want you to hear that again. Persist in listening. Because God may choose to communicate with us in any number of different ways.

[15 : 19] Now, it's not that God is out of the sending angels and burning bush business. God can do whatever God chooses to do. However, I'm willing to bet, especially I'm looking at some of my more experienced disciples in here, I'm willing to bet we probably haven't had too many burning bush moments in this room, right?

But we also have had a lot of answered prayers in this room, have we not? So, those two things being true, if the answer does not just drop in your lap five seconds after you ask it, does not mean no answer is coming.

You have to be willing to persist in the listening. You have to open yourself to however God is going to choose to send the answer.

Now, that could be something big and dramatic. It could happen simply in a text exchange with a friend. It could be that as you're driving to work one day, a particular song comes on the radio and the answer seems to be perfectly clear in your head all of a sudden.

God can do whatever God chooses to do to respond to you. The issue for us is to be open enough and persistent enough to listen to however God chooses to respond.

[16 : 43] Lastly, and this is really the hardest one, you need to be ready to do what God tells you to do. That's really where many of us will fall down.

See, the thing is, when God shows up, rarely does God just give you something easy to do. right? That when God shows up, he rarely just says, hey, how about you just drop a dollar in this box and then we'll solve the problem.

No, God is probably going to say something that's going to require you to have this conversation with the person who pissed you off last week. Or I want you to go and serve over here with a whole bunch of people who make you kind of uncomfortable and scare you a little bit.

Or, yeah, that pain you've been feeling, maybe you actually do need to go to the doctor about that. See, those are the sorts of things that will push you, that will challenge you, that will ask you to put your faith into practice in ways that are not always comfortable.

but because those are the messages, we try to write them off and we say, well, that can't be God.

[18 : 04] God would ask me to do that. In fact, that's exactly what God would want you to do. We have to be open to that truth.

Remember, check the stories we just heard because Ahaz didn't want to trust God. That would have been the hard part.

The easy part is to line himself with the bigger army. All the earthly things said, hey, line up with the big guy. Whereas, the heart thing, the spirit thing, the faithful thing said, trust God.

And God, God's self showed up and said, that is a mistake. Don't go that way. But, the other way was easier.

The other way felt better. The other way made more sense. And it turned out badly. What about Joseph?

[19 : 14] All the earthly things pointed in a particular direction. all the earthly things made perfect sense. But it wasn't the godly thing.

And he had to be courageous enough to step into the godly thing. The challenge for us is, can we do that? And here's really the point, guys.

Even with those three things in front of you, when your God senses have you ready to go this way, but God is telling you to go this way.

What's the secret sauce that's actually going to help you decide to be faithful? See, here's the missing ingredient. When that uncomfortable direction comes, when that thing that is so ridiculous in your mind, when that thing that is so scary in your mind, when that thing that makes no sense is what's in front of you, how do you take the step?

You've got to remember a basic truth. The basic truth is how much you are loved by God.

[20 : 39] God. See, that's the peace we forget in those times. When those directions come and they make us uncomfortable, they ask us to do hard things, they make us do uncomfortable things, but you've got to remember who's given the direction.

If you actually trust the person given the direction, you tend to follow the direction. Think about your own lived life. Think about those friends that you have, those people in your life who are your go-to people.

We all have them. That when you've got something going on in your life and you need some help, you've got your go-to people. You know who your people are. And there's a whole lot of people in your life, or at least I certainly hope so, there's a whole lot of people in your life who love you.

But when you really need advice, when you really need help, you've got your go-to people. Now, friends, who do you think is a better go-to person than Jesus?

Because the people who in your life who love you that are your go-to people, you know that they want the best for you. You know that they love you. You know they want you to be successful. do you really think that there is anybody walking this planet who wants you to be successful more than Jesus?

[22 : 12] Not successful in the materially, but successful in getting it right way. Do you really think that in terms of giving you good advice, do you really think that anybody walking this planet is going to give you better advice than Jesus?

when you talk about people who love you, do you really believe in your heart of hearts that there's someone in this world who loves you better than Jesus?

So when the directions that Jesus gives you come, will you trust that love enough to actually say yes to it?

It will make very little sense, like when Siri tells you to go over here, when you want to go over there. But, if you will dare to trust God, if you can give yourself enough courage and enough faith to trust that you are being loved by God in this, that God is not going to steer you wrong, if you can surrender to that, if you can believe that, if you can really trust that, then you know that where you are headed is your best possible place with God.

And that's where we say we want to go. So friends, believe even when it's scary. Believe even when it's hard.

[24 : 19] Because God will not take you to the wrong place. Amen and amen. Loving and gracious God, we know that you love us beyond all that we can comprehend, and certainly beyond all that we could ever deserve.

But Lord, it is that love that is our safe place. It is that love that allows a world that makes no sense to fall into place.

It is that love that gives us the courage to face the things that are scary. It is that love that makes it possible to endure the things that are hard. When we know that you are in this with us, when we know that you are by our side in the scariest and worst of moments, when we can count on you to carry us when we can't go forward ourselves, loving God, we know that it is you who are our difference maker.

It is you who is the one who sets us up for success. It is you who holds the keys and the plan to all that we could ever secretly hope.

So God, let us yield to your will. Let us listen for your voice among all the noise in our lives. Let us trust that your love will always steer us to the right place.

[25 : 50] In Jesus most holy name we pray. Amen. Amen and amen. So as we prepare to go into the world this week and live our faith, there is so much that is happening before us during this particular time of year.

So first, I want to give Loretta a chance to make an announcement. Hello. Hi, everyone. So next week we are going out and meeting at 1230 to sing Christmas Carol.

So if this is something that you love doing, then please sign up on the back sheet on that back table, okay? And I hope to see you there. All right. We got a lot happening at the back table today.

So first, let me draw your attention to the back of the bulletin. DJ got my attention this morning. He says, as you look at that Christmas dinner in Niagara Falls piece, as always, we have been generous, but we are lacking in one important piece.

We have an urgent need for ham. So if you are able to deliver a Christmas ham so that DJ can use it for Christmas dinner in Niagara Falls, please have it here by end of day Wednesday.

[26 : 58] By end of day Wednesday. So we have all responded to these calls in the past, and I'm sure we will come through again, but needed to make that one public. Otherwise, it could be an interesting Christmas dinner.

So that said, I also want to draw your attention to the Blue Christmas Service. For those who may be having a tough time during this time of year because there are always folks who are struggling. And we, of course, know the most obvious one is people who've lost folks recently, but the loss doesn't have to be recent.

It can also be just sometimes you have a problem just getting through this season because of something else that's hurting you. So that being said, the Blue Christmas Service is a great place where you are in a safe space with those feelings.

And you will find like-minded people and a special worship that helps speak to that particular reality. That's Thursday the 21st and we will begin at 6pm.

I want to highlight a couple of other things, especially one that's not in the bulletin. There are those, there's a group of us in the church that have started a really great conversation around the series The Chosen.

[28 : 06] Many of you have heard of this. and we had a movie night here a few weeks ago where we watched a movie that had been produced by the same folks. Well, they have put out their Christmas special for this year and we just found out about this this week.

It's in theaters only right now and it's only out for a week. It's in theaters only right now and it's only out for a week. We are talking about trying to get a group together to go see it next Saturday the 16th after service.

We have Saturday worship as you know at 5 o'clock and we're hoping to have the group gather after that time. We haven't picked what theater what show and all that stuff yet because A, we don't know how big the group is.

So that being said, if you're interested we have a sign-up sheet in the back just simply let us know if you're interested. If you're watching online you can email the office directly and let us know that you're interested in this as well.

Other thing I want to highlight is we are starting our small groups in January. So there are three tracks you see the announcement in the bulletin I'm not going to give it a whole lot of detail because it's in there but our next steps, small groups for folks who are interested in growing their faith in a particular way.

[29 : 19] Whether it's deepening your prayer life, whether it's discerning your spiritual gifts and calling, or if it's an introduction to the Bible. Maybe you don't have a whole lot of church background and you've never really understood how the Bible is put together and how to use it.

There are three different groups and there's a sheet in the back to just let us know you're interested. The groups will schedule their own meetings. That's why we want to know who's interested in that way. Just simply let us know you're interested.

Then with the group we'll figure out when they're going to meet. Okay? And last one I want to highlight is the idea of our more practical and immediate need.

Our current snowplow contract does not cover shoveling our sidewalks. Okay? And we got caught this week. Let's just be direct. We got caught this week. So we are looking for some volunteers who are willing to come out if we call to help make sure we get the sidewalks shoveled.

You won't get called every single time and we need to see how many people we get to figure out some of those logistics. But right now it would be really helpful to the church if you could simply just let us know you're willing to talk about it by putting your name on the sheet.

[30 : 25] Same deal if you're watching online. Just simply let us know you're interested in that by emailing the church. All that having been said, let's receive our benediction and remember this benediction is responsive.

We wait for justice. We wait for restored health. We wait for wholeness.

We wait for peace. And so my friends, like bells ringing out the news that God is with us, continue to fill the night left by sadness with your messages of love.

Go into your lives humming the tunes that keep love alive in you and that spur you on in your work of justice and reconciliation. Like those in the Christmas story, hear the angel telling us, do not be afraid.

And now in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, go to be God's love for God and all God's children.

[31 : 43] Amen. Amen.