

In the hyper connected world we live in, with cellphone data at our fingertips, google maps, or Siri telling us when to turn left or right, we've largely forgotten how crucial signs are for getting where we need to go... Have you ever been in a place where you can't read the signs? It can be totally debilitating.

To grasp the significance of this sign we need to begin our journey somewhere around 735BC in a divided and threatened Kingdom, while there **{slide 2}** we'll consider i) The original sign, and see one response to it. Around 730 years after that we'll look at ii) two other responses to the same sign, and then ask ourselves iii) "how do we live in light of the sign?"

Before we really launch in, let's pray.

Lord thank you this season of Advent, as we consider signs given to us by the prophets today, would you give us the courage to go to trust you, and the direction they point us? We ask this in Jesus' name, and for his glory. Amen.

*i) The original sign*

**{slide 3}**

'When Ahaz son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, was king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram and Pekah son of Remaliah king of Israel marched up to fight against Jerusalem, but they could not overpower it'

It's another unusual place to locate the Christmas story. **{slide 4}**

The Kingdom of Israel is divided, into Ephraim in the North, and Judah in the south. In the South Ahaz sits on the throne in Jerusalem, he hasn't been on it very long, and it doesn't look like he'll be on it for much longer.

His Northern rival Pekah has allied with King Rezin of Aram (modern day Syria) and they are marching to war against him. Jerusalem is the objective, and their ultimate goal we see in v.6 is clear. Invade Judah, set up a puppet king.

King Ahaz and his people are fully aware of what awaits them. V.2 tells us that their hearts are shaken, like trees of the forest shaken by the wind. There aren't mildly concerned, or a bit worried that their enemies are coming, they are terrified. Judah is tiny, all seems hopeless. All the signs point to the destruction of this kingdom, and the end of King David's line. The enemy force is superior, Ahaz's days are numbered. **{slide 5}**

Except for one thing. The Lord Almighty, the Lord of Armies, who speaks through the prophet Isaiah. While Ahaz is preparing himself for siege, God sends Isaiah, and his son with a message.

“Don’t be afraid, don’t lose heart - these guys are nothing! They are smouldering stubs of firewood.”

Isaiah comes to remind Ahaz that his enemies can’t act apart from God’s will. They are mustering on his border, but God will not let them overcome Judah. Isaiah brings a promise from God. If you stand firm in me, you will endure, though your enemies are about to attack “It will not take place, it will not happen”, v.7

And he brings a warning v.9 “If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.”

God is reminding Ahaz of His faithfulness, and makes it explicitly clear that if Ahaz places his trust in God, his kingdom will endure. Ahaz doesn’t.

In an ultimate show of patience, God speaks again; “let me prove it to you” God cries out to Ahaz in v.11 Ask for anything and no matter how big or how small I will give it to you. I will show you, prove to you, that I am going to keep you safe.

But Ahaz has it all in hand. When he came to the throne he threw his lot in with the Assyrians for protection. 2 kings 16:7-9 tells the story of Ahaz stripping the Temple of its gold and silver, and sending it as tribute to Assyria.

It gets worse. Assyria demands a realignment of their worship. The altar in the temple is redesigned, and after that Ahaz is summoned to Damascus to bow before the Assyrian gods.

Ahaz doesn’t know how things will work out, but instead of trusting God he does things his own way, he stands on his own two feet, he rejects the offer of God, he doesn’t need it, he knows better.

How does Ahaz mask his self-sufficiency? How does he explain away his wrenching control - with a show of religion. Look at verse 12 with me.

He goes to the Scriptures. He justifies his rejection of the Lord ‘I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test.’ He puts on a show of religiosity and makes the “right” response, but for all the wrong reasons. Ahaz uses fake piety and makes a grand statement to mask his lack of trust in the Lord, because he has already wrested control of the situation. He has been thoroughly convinced that the only way out of this situation is with Assyria’s help.

Aren’t we tempted to do the same? When the trouble comes and we are prompted by the Spirit to remember God’s promises in Scripture, we can respond like Ahaz...

Of course I trust you Lord, but....  
And out come our contingencies. Our plans B, C, and D.

With health concerns, and financial pressures, relationship difficulties or when our businesses are struggling, or the COVID red tape is hard to get through, when we feel rejected or forgotten in this current climate... What is our tendency? Do we trust, or do we control?

We must look to the one who is faithful. Trust the signs he has given us. He is good for what he has promised!

Ahaz refuses to trust so God sends Isaiah again who says '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 Immanuel.' It is clear who is in control...

The sign that Ahaz rejected, refused to humble himself and ask for, is exactly what he will get.

And, the consequences for Ahaz will be catastrophic. His self sufficiency will result in total destruction. There will be a child born, a child born to a woman who is as yet unmarried, and when the child is old enough to know right from wrong the kingdom will be devoured by Assyria and people will be living off what they can gather and find, represented by "curds and wild honey" v.16.

The sign. The big sign, Immanuel, God with us. And here we join the dots don't we?

Our minds jump to Mary, now we are starting to get to the Christmas story - but before we go there we need to wrestle with the fact that this is a prophecy first for Ahaz, we can't jump ahead to the birth of Jesus just yet. There are some problematic aspects which need thoughtful consideration.

The word translated as "virgin" in the NIV isn't quite as clear in English **{slide 6}** as Hebrew. When Isaiah was speaking there were three possible word choices he could've made.

The word for virgin

The word for young woman

The word for woman

Isaiah choose the ambiguous term "young woman" and gives two functions of the prophecy.

**{slide 7}** In chapter 8, Isaiah marries an unmarried woman, and she bears him a child. A Child who fulfils what is promised to Ahaz around the destruction of Judah. That child is a sign - a sign that God has not abandoned his people even though Ahaz has turned his back on Isaiah's God.

We can't just isolate 7:14 and wrench it out of place to apply it fully to Jesus. We need to recognise what it means for Ahaz and Judah and hold a tension with Matthew's usage in 1:23.

It's not an either/or prophecy, but a both/and prophecy. A culmination for Ahaz, clearly laid out in chapter 8:1-4 and also for the House of David as God continues to fulfil his covenant promise.

This both/and reality becomes even more important as we see the Davidic family lined crushed by Assyria. Assyria will not and cannot deliver him but God will still deliver his people, those who do trust in his promise, both then, and now by a child.

For us the Immanuel we see, the sign we read, will tell of God's enduring promise for all time. The promise to bless all nations through the line of Abraham. God's intention to bring his people out of darkness and into the light will not be thwarted.

Doesn't this double fulfilment prophecy makes the sign even more wonderful? It's applied then and 725 years later. Can't we see the hand of God at work? Both through the child born by the prophetess married by Isaiah, and through Mary the mother of the Lord Jesus. **{slide 8}**

ii) two other responses

Look at how different Mary and Joseph's responses are to the sign offered by God, to that of Ahaz.

After making it clear that Jesus is the much anticipated heir of to David through the genealogy at the start of Matthew, Matthew describes something which is hard to believe.

Mary, a virgin is pregnant. We learn she is pregnant by the power of by the Holy Spirit.

This is a particular pregnancy. This has never happened before in human history. It will never happen again. We know how babies are made and so the very idea of a virgin giving birth is ludicrous to us.

For Joseph, like Ahaz, his world looks like it is about to fall apart. His honour is about to be devastated. His family deeply shamed.

The consequences for Joseph, the social death, and rejection are very real. Can you imagine the whispers? The guilt the shame?

Maybe some of us even know a little of what that's like. To be pregnant outside of marriage. Feeling that deep shame, the fear of what people would say when they found out. The rejection by family and friends. Doors closing.

Yet through what is seen as a shameful beginning, God makes a way. A way of redemption, and healing and wholeness for all his children, for any whole would turn to Him and proclaim his Lordship in their life.

God gives Joseph a sign through an angel visiting in a dream. God gives Joseph a sign. An Angel comes and tells him to take Mary as his wife regardless.

And Joseph, despite the shame and difficulties, Trusts God explicitly. Like Ahaz, Joseph had found another way out. v.19 tells us He had made up his mind to quietly divorce Mary and yet here he trusts his God. He accepts the sign.

Joseph and Ahaz. Both men from David's family. Both men facing a dilemma and potential ruin. Both men having made up their minds about how to best deal with the situation before them. Only Joseph trusts God. Ahaz trusts himself and his work. Ahaz was offered any sign he wanted and he refused to trust. Joseph is given a sign and is asked to do the unthinkable (marry Mary) and he does; with all of the baggage attached.

Joseph accepts that what God says is as good as done. He believes that this isn't just any child. He accepts that Mary has not been unfaithful to the pledge she made him. He trusts that this child will be the Messiah, that this child is Immanuel, God with us. The theological term the incarnation hadn't been invented yet and it was happening in Joseph's very life.

All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> 'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' (which means 'God with us'). The sign pointing to salvation.

A sign which Joseph trusted. A sign which Mary trusted.

In the gospel of Luke we see the great trouble which faces Mary. This young girl, maybe around 12 or 13, told by the Angel Gabriel that she will conceive and give birth to a son, and she is to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants for ever; his kingdom will never end.

'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May your word to me be fulfilled.'

That is real trust in the signs the Lord gives!

Compared to us Mary and Joseph, didn't have that many signs. One visit from an angel, a pregnant cousin, Anna and Simeon at the temple when Jesus was circumcised.... Maybe we could include Jesus being in the temple in Jerusalem at 12 years of age... that's it. Two or three clear signs, months, years apart.

Dear friends, we have so much more! We have seen Immanuel we have seen his life relayed to us by eyewitnesses. We trust, we have faith in the signs recorded for us the life of God with us. The real life events of God incarnate the Lord Jesus Christ. Who lived, breathed, walked, loved, wept, ate, rose again, ascended to heaven and sent his Spirit. **{slide 9}**

iii) "how do we live in light of the sign?"

How do we show our trust in the Signs the Lord has given us?

We display a deeper commitment to prayer. Speaking to the Lord about our needs our concerns or worries and asking him to help us to fix our eyes on Jesus becomes our first response and difficulty not our last resort. **{slide 10}**

We display a deeper commitment to prayer. Speaking to God about our needs, our concerns, or worries and asking him to help us to fix our eyes on Jesus. Prayer becomes our first response in difficulty, not our last resort.

{slide 11} We delight in the Word of God knowing that it is the place where he is where he is revealing himself to us we pick it up and we delight in it not as a chore or an obligation not like filling the tank about car doing it just enough to get by but because we want to hear the voice of the risen Lord we want to see his compassion his tenderness his mercies are fresh and be confronted and horrified by the death of our son as we measure ourselves against the canon of Scripture.

**{slide 12}** We crucify the flesh. We find our satisfaction in the Lord. When We are weak and we when we are low we reach out for comfort where does the mind or the hand go. What do we click on? What exhilarates or excites us, what peeps us up?

What do we linger on? "What the Heart Loves, the Will Chooses and the Mind Justifies" says Ashley Null, distilling the teaching of Thomas Cranmer. When we trust God and truly believe that He wants our best then we turn to Him and hear His voice more often.

As God's people on this side of the cross we will face daily temptations not to trust our Lord. When finances are tight when our families are struggling when we feel tired when our ministries seem to be failing when our hopes and dreams don't come to fruition we will be tempted to ask the questions which have the origin in the garden of Eden: does God really want the best for me? Can God's way really be trusted?

Dear brothers and sisters take heart we have seen the sign, in full HD. The Lord Jesus, revealed to us in the pages of Scripture, brought alive to us by the Holy Spirit.

We know and trust his miraculous virgin birth, the big neon sign given to us, which we've examined this morning. We have seen his death and resurrection. We live in the light of his glorious Ascension. We wait for his coming again.

The Lord has given us these signs recorded in Holy Scripture that we might believe and live trust out in our daily lives.

Not wresting control like Ahaz, putting up a religious smoke screen, but coming to the Lord Jesus humbly and meekly. Crucifying the flesh submitting to the Holy Spirit all the more as we see the return of Christ, his second advent approaching. We take heart, and live the way of the Lord Jesus because we trust the sign - because we have Immanuel, God with us.

Pray