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First Christian Church
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Live Expectantly

Isaiah 7:10-17 10Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, 11Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. 12But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. 13Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? 14Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. 15He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. 16For 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. 17The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah-the king of Assyria."

A colleague of mine recently told two stories about his then-kindergarten and now-first-grade daughter. Before the end of the school year last May, she announced to her father after they had gotten to the bus stop a few minutes early: "Hooray! I get to spend more time thinking at the bus stop about the math we're going to do today!" And then, near the beginning of the school year in September, she bounced from her bed one morning and cheerfully said, "I can't wait to get to school early and do math. Math! Math! Math!" To which her 8th grade older sister replied with some exasperation "WHAT is wrong with you?!?"

The title of today's sermon is "Live expectantly." But there is a certain sense in which this sermon – the fourth in our Advent sermon series focusing on the prophet Isaiah – actually has a bit of a trick title. Last week we looked at what it might mean to choose to live defiantly, to choose to not give in to the fearfulness that is so understandably seductive sometimes and instead to choose to do loving actions in the

face of xenophobia and hatreds that grieve our God. In the same way, our earlier sermons looked at what it might mean to choose to live peaceably in the face of appeals to violence or to choose to live discerningly in an era in which fake news and Facebook-driven conspiracy theories threaten the fabric of our social compact with one another. But there is a sense in which you cannot help but live expectantly – one way or another, you expect certain things to happen, certain things to occur, some things to take place and other things not to take place. You don't choose to live expectantly; it's simply part of the nature of life. Now, that is not to say that you always get what you expect. Anyone over the age of one week old knows that's not true. But, nonetheless, like my colleague's daughter, if you have high expectations about what will happen, if you generally can see your life as a gift to be unwrapped and not a burden to be borne, you are more likely to know joy.

The question that our scripture raises this morning is this: how can you choose to live your life in such a way that the things you expect are more in keeping with what God wants, what God desires, what the Christ whom we await wants? In our reading from Isaiah today, we are back with King Ahaz, whom we were introduced to last week. The historical context of our reading today is complex but suffice it to say that the people of the southern kingdom of Israel – which we know by the name of Judah – are once again, as they were in last week's reading, under threat. There were a variety of nations in the middle east maneuvering to become dominant and these nations were often at war but also often made temporary alliances that fell apart at the next crisis. Sound familiar? The big dog in the arena was Assyria, which had conquered territories left and right and, as we saw last week, was now threatening the southern kingdom of

Judah, over which King Ahaz rules. And so Ahaz has some choices before him, and the most tempting one is for him to make an alliance with another country to fend off the destruction of Jerusalem and his country.

Ahaz, in other words, expects the worst – either he and his people of the southern kingdom of Judah will be conquered by Assyria, or Judah will need to ally itself with another military power that might protect it but would then ultimately consume it. As one commentator says, “King Ahaz teeters on the brink of a disastrous military alliance for his people’s security..., but such an alliance will fail.”¹ You see, Ahaz is not wise enough to see that the alliance holding the attackers together is actually a very fragile thing and is already showing signs of coming apart, and Assyria itself has begun to manifest some of the weaknesses that will lead to its being conquered itself by Babylon in not too many years. Now, hindsight is always 20-20, but here’s the point: because Ahaz expected the worst and only the worst, he failed to explore alternatives, he failed to imagine the fragility of his attackers’ alliance. His expectations narrowed his vision and his range of possibilities and in considering an alliance with another power, he was contemplating a permanent solution to a temporary problem.

A permanent solution to a temporary problem. We’ve all made or thought about making that mistake, haven’t we? We’ve all said or almost said words to a child, a spouse, a friend, in response to a moment of sheer anger that would have been permanently harmful. We’ve all issued ultimatums – which, by the way, are a sign that

¹<http://books.upperroom.org/2013/12/16/trusting-in-god/>

we are feeling powerless, not powerful² – which are hard to back away from once the words leave our lips. We've all made decisions in response to temporary setbacks that forever close off possibilities when we didn't need to do that at all.. So, my friends, here is the first lesson from Isaiah and King Ahaz: don't let your expectations become so narrow, so circumscribed, that you are tempted to address a temporary problem in your life with a permanent response that ends up hurting your life even more.

A second lesson from Ahaz's story is this: Don't let the expectation take root in your life that only you know what's best and you don't need other people's perspectives. The prophet came to Ahaz and told him to ask God for a sign of what he should do in response to the crisis facing him and his country. And Ahaz refused. As one writer says, "Perhaps the king had become like those of us who... have given up looking for any signs beyond those we can make ourselves. We're in charge. Perhaps we're afraid that if God gave us a sign, it would not be what we wanted. Better not to ask at all."³ Now, Ahaz pretties up his refusal by claiming that he is only trying to be faithful, but the story clearly shows that he trusts only his own perspective and has given up on even God. He's not interested in what God has to say, he's not interested in what the prophet has to say. As one pastor puts it, "Ahaz is covering up his own anxiety and need to find an answer to the problems besetting him without any help from God, by [pretending] piety."⁴ Now, yes, there are times when our consciences tell us that we must forge ahead in some way despite what others may think, but the reality is that

²I will be forever grateful to the Rev. Barbara Blaisdell for this insight!

³http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1942

⁴<http://www.bobcornwall.com/2016/12/signs-of-divine-presence-lectionary.html>

those occasions are really not that many. Most of life is more mundane, more complex, more muddled, more ambiguous, and you and I need all the help we can get. When we stop expecting that trusted friends will have something of value to add to our decisions, then we run the risk of a kind of self-absorption and even egomania that will end up hurting ourselves and those around us. So, a second lesson from Ahaz: Expect, instead, that others can be a help to us when we're trying to decide something.

A third and final lesson from the story of Ahaz is this: Be open to the fact that God's perspective for your life may look very different from your own understandings and expectations. Even though Ahaz refused to ask God for a sign of what he should do, the prophet went ahead and gave him one anyway: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him 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." The meaning of that sign for Ahaz was this: the armed alliance threatening him would in fact fall apart within a few months, in the time that it took for a child to be born and weaned. The Upper Room's devotional for this scripture says this: "A certain young woman whom they both know is pregnant. By the time her son is old enough to know basic right from wrong, the two nations whom Ahaz now dreads will be deserted."⁵ And so God's sign reinforces the earlier two lessons: Ahaz should not seeking a terrible permanent solution to what would in fact prove to be a temporary threat, and Ahaz

⁵<http://books.upperroom.org/2013/12/16/trusting-in-god/>

should not so wall himself off from others' perspectives that he cannot see the alternatives that they could show him. God's wisdom is wiser than our wisdom, and while God does not send any of us emails or text messages telling us exactly what to do, God surely does move in your life and mine in ways that nudge and lure us towards possibilities that we would have never thought of left only to our own understandings and expectations.

Before we close, though, we need, of course, to note that it is in these short verses that Christians see the coming of the Christ. Since the earliest days of the church, they have done so because they have seen in these words, in this exchange with Ahaz, the good news that God is indeed wiser than we are, knows we need a Savior to save us and pull us back from our own self-absorption and sometimes oversized egos, and that we need to be reminded that Christ comes to both love us and call us to account when we are hurting ourselves or those around us. What do I mean? Well, listen to the words of one writer who reminds us that the coming of Christ is not simply sentimentality or sappiness, for the gospel, as I have said many times, always comes to us as a word of assurance and a word of challenge:

...when God comes it will always mean both judgment and promise. God comes always to bring life and salvation; but God comes always to expose human sin and purge everything that stands in the way of justice and liberty.⁶

What are those things that, indeed, stand in the way of justice and liberty? The very things that hampered and hindered and harmed Ahaz: a narrowness of vision, an

⁶http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=13

inability to trust and love others, a misplaced confidence in our ability to go it alone, an unwillingness to let God shape our lives. And to that I would add: an inability or unwillingness to love others in a way that truly sees them as brothers and sisters. In her sermon today, my wife, the Rev. Barbara Blaisdell, says this: For Christians,

...this quote from Isaiah is intended to teach us that the Christ who is entirely with us as fully human, is and will remain also elusive to us. He disarms our need to control. He opens our minds to un-imagined horizons. And his greatest gift is to ask us to let go of everything that keeps us from the Spirit's freedom to love.

The freedom to love! That's the whole point! The child we ask to be born in our hearts offers us the glorious gift of the freedom to love!⁷

My friends, the question for you and me this morning, as we would seek to live in appropriate expectation, is indeed: what is keeping us from loving? Is it our fear? Is it our pride? Is it our belief that the Christmas story truly will not change anything, and so we won't let it change us either? I don't know about you, but all of those things sometimes constrain and constrict me, they lower my expectations. My prayer this morning, for you and for me, is that the Good News of Christmas, the good news of God-With-Us, Immanuel, might truly convict us, change us, and free us, indeed, to love more widely, less fearfully, and more hopefully. Or, as the beloved Christmas carol says it, "O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; Cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today."

Let that be our hope and our joy and our peace as we live expectantly.

⁷The Rev. Barbara Blaisdell, "The Coming of the Light: Dreamed." Sermon preached at First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Tacoma, Washington, December 18, 2016.