

Fear and Faith

Isaiah 7 – 8

Turn to Isaiah 7 please. This sermon is about the danger of fear. Being afraid, on its own, is a common human emotion, and just being afraid is not a problem. Fear becomes a problem when it steers us away from serving God.

At the beginning of Isaiah 6 we saw a breath-taking picture of God. God is on a Throne in his Palace, high and exalted, the Lord Almighty, the King of all, and his glory fills the whole earth. That was true 700 years before Christ, in Isaiah's time, and it was true 800 years later when John wrote Revelation, and it is true this moment.

And we praise God and worship him and enjoy him. On Sunday. And during the week things around us make us anxious. Does worshipping the King of all, the Lord Almighty have anything to do with our fears? Isaiah 7-8 is about that. There two are main characters here, Isaiah the prophet, and Ahaz the king, the descendant of David. They both have good reasons to be afraid.

After Solomon died, united Israel divided into two nations. The ten northern tribes separated from Solomon's son Rehoboam. They were called "Israel," or "Ephraim." They had their own kings, and their capital was Samaria. Judah, in the south, continued with David's line of kings, and worshipped at the temple in Jerusalem. Another nation just north of Israel was Aram.

**Isa 7:1 The Recent Past.** *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.*

Aram and Israel attacked Judah and Jerusalem. They were stopped, but it was close. Aram and Israel almost defeated Judah, pushed hard, then went back home.

**7:2 The Present Danger** *Now the house of David was told, "Aram has allied itself with Ephraim"; so the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind.*

Israel and Aram were making plans to join up and attack Judah again. King Ahaz and all Judah was terrified. They feared that this time Israel and Aram would overpower Jerusalem.

**More information from 2 Kings 16.** Now we need to read 2 Kings 16. There we learn that when Ahaz found out Israel and Aram were planning to attack Jerusalem again, he sent a huge amount of silver and gold to the superpower of the day, the king of Assyria, and paid the Assyrians to attack Israel and Aram, so they would not attack Judah again.

This is important: the rest of Isaiah 7 happens when Ahaz is planning to pay for a treaty with the Assyrians, but he has not yet sent the message and the silver and gold to Assyria. He's planning to call on the Assyrians and pay them, but has not yet sent it off. Before he acts, God speaks.

**7:3-9 God's Message to Ahaz.** *Then the Lord said to Isaiah, "Go out, you and your son Shear-Jashub [a remnant will return], to meet Ahaz at the end of the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Launderer's Field. <sup>4</sup> Say to him, 'Be careful to keep still, and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stumps of firewood—because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and of the son of Remaliah. <sup>5</sup> Aram, Ephraim and Remaliah's son have plotted your ruin, saying, <sup>6</sup> "Let us invade Judah; let us tear it apart and divide it among ourselves, and make the son of Tabeel king over it."*

<sup>7</sup> *Yet this is what the Sovereign Lord says: "It will not take place, it will not happen, <sup>8</sup> for the head of Aram is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is only Rezin. Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be too shattered to be a people. <sup>9</sup> The head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is only Remaliah's son. If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all."*

Here was God's message to Ahaz: "Ahaz, don't worry about Israel and Aram. They are two smoldering stumps when a fire is dying out. They are nearly done. They will never attack you. They are the son of Remaliah, and the son of Tabeel, and you are the descendant of David. I will keep you safe."

In particular, let's look at the beginning and the end of God's message. The beginning - 7:4 *Be careful to keep still, and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart because of them.*

The problem was not that Ahaz and the people were shaking with fear. The problem was that this fear was about to guide them into something God did not want. "DON'T SEND FOR THE ASSYRIANS! You can shake with fear all you want, though it is not necessary. But do not send for the Assyrians. Be careful to stay still. Be careful to wait this out. Don't let fear guide you."

7:9 is the end of God's message: *If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.* Stand firm in faith does NOT mean no more anxiety. It does not mean, "now I don't feel afraid." It means: don't let your fear guide you and steer you. Don't send for the Assyrians. If our fear steers our lives, we will fall. If our faith steers and guides us, we will stand firm

When our fear guides us rather than our faith, God is offended. He's patient, and compassionate, and he's also offended. He says, "you worship me as the holy God, the exalted King, the Lord Almighty, whose glory fills the earth, and then your fear of little things guides your life, not your trust in me." God is patient, faithful, compassionate, and also offended.

**7:10-11 Offer and Rejection** *Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, <sup>11</sup> "Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights." <sup>12</sup> But Ahaz said, "I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test."*

On the whole, God does not like being asked for a sign, a quick miracle to prove he's paying attention. Jesus didn't like it much either. Wanting a sign usually means we don't trust what God said. But here God reaches out to Ahaz, God wants Ahaz to get this right, God offers him a sign.

Ahaz refused a sign. He pretended to be pious and devout, which he certainly was not. He rejected the offer because he had already decided to send for the Assyrians. He had not done it, but he had made his choice, and God could not change his mind. He would not be careful to stay still; he would not stand firm in his faith in God.

The problem is not that he and the people were shaking with fear like trees shake in the wind. The problem is that they were sending for the Assyrians.

*7:13-17 **The Alternative Sign** 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? <sup>14</sup> Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. <sup>15</sup> He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, <sup>16</sup> for before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste. <sup>17</sup> The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah—he will bring the king of Assyria."*

Matthew quotes this paragraph about the birth of Jesus, but let's leave that alone for now. "Virgin" in Hebrew just meant a young woman. In Hebrew, there is no miracle in this paragraph. It means that a young woman will conceive and have a son, and while that boy is still a toddler, Israel and Aram will be taken out of the picture, will be no threat to Judah.

Matthew uses this to speak of the miraculous birth of Christ, but in Hebrew this paragraph does not suggest a miraculous birth. Even without that the paragraph is a little confusing, and will leave it alone. The crucial line is v16: *before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.*

That ends the Ahaz part of this story. God called Ahaz to trust him, and not to let his fears guide him, and Ahaz refused. He chose to take his protection into his own hands, which meant he was going to fall.

Jesus has 10 verses on anxiety ending Matthew 6. He mentions anxiety 5 times in 10 verses. It is not that the feeling of anxiety dishonours God. We feel what we feel. In the middle of that section Jesus says, "seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and he will take care of you." The feeling of anxiety is not the problem. That we no longer seek first the kingdom, because we are trying to protect ourselves, that is the problem, and it is a God problem.

*8:5. **Epilogue on Judah:** The Lord spoke to me again: <sup>6</sup> "Because this people has rejected the gently flowing waters of Shiloah and rejoices over Rezin and the son of Remaliah, <sup>7</sup> therefore the Lord is about to bring against them the mighty floodwaters of the Euphrates—the king of Assyria with all his pomp. It will overflow all its channels, run over all its banks <sup>8</sup> and sweep on into Judah, swirling over it, passing through it and reaching up to the neck. Its outspread wings will cover the breadth of your land, Immanuel!"*

"Shiloah" was a stream that flowed into Jerusalem and gave the city its water supply. Rejecting Shiloah here seems to mean rejecting God's promise to protect Jerusalem. The people reject God's ability to protect Shiloah and rejoice over king of Israel and the king of Aram.

Q: Ahaz and the people were shaking with fear. How is that rejoicing? A: God is saying, “you admire the strength of these two kings, you respect their strength, and by sending for Assyria you reject my strength, you reject the King of Kings, the Lord Almighty. You reject my power and you rejoice over theirs.” That is God’s response when our fears guide us off his path.

God was offended, not that they were shaking with fear, but that this fear guided them, rather than their faith in him. Because of this he will bring trouble to them. You reject my gentle stream, so I will bring you a flood of Assyrians.

So Ahaz failed. He left God’s path in order to protect himself. From Isaiah 8:11, God takes up the same topic with Isaiah himself, to make sure Isaiah stands firm in faith where Ahaz failed.

**8:11-13 God’s Message to Isaiah:** *This is what the Lord says to me with his strong hand upon me, warning me not to follow the way of this people:* <sup>12</sup> *“Do not call conspiracy everything this people calls a conspiracy; do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it.”* <sup>13</sup> *The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread.*

When something scares me, I can nearly turn into an atheist. What I mean is, in my mind there are two actors, me and the monster I fear. I sweat with fear, wondering how to escape the monster. What’s the problem? There is no God in that picture. There should be three actors in that picture, me, a monster who’s bigger than I am, and the God who rules the universe.

I ask God to help, but once I’m finished praying and get back to the important work of fretting and wringing my hands, God has disappeared, it’s just the monster and me.

That’s an awful way to live, but here’s when it gets to be a problem: when I live through a scary day, do I live as if there are three actors, God and monster and me, or as if there are just two actors, monster and me? I will live and act when I am scared. Will I act as if the monster is the Great Power in my life, or as if God is the Great Power in my life? What does my life show?

That’s what God is going after here: *This is what the Lord said to me with his strong hand upon me, warning me not to follow the way of this people:* <sup>12</sup> *“Do not call conspiracy everything this people calls a conspiracy; do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it.”* <sup>13</sup> *The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread.*

**8:14-16 God: A fortress, or a stumbling block.** *He will be a holy place; for both Israel and Judah, he will be a stone that causes people to stumble, and a rock that makes them fall. And for the people of Jerusalem, he will be a trap and a snare.* <sup>15</sup> *Many of them will stumble; they will fall and be broken, they will be snared and captured.”* <sup>16</sup> *Bind up this testimony of warning and seal up God’s instruction among my disciples.*

God is always in our picture. “Immanuel” means “God with us,” and occurs once each in Isa 7 and Isa 8. For God’s people, it is never just us and the monster, it is always God and us and the monster, always three not two, because God is always in our picture. When we live as if he is not in our fearful situation, he will cause us to stumble and fall. He will be a snare and a trap.

He’s determined that we will trust him, and live like it. If we do not stand firm in our faith, we will not stand at all. It is a word of warning to all God’s disciples, an instruction to all God’s disciples. He is in our picture. We can shake as much as we want, but we need to live out faith.

8:17 Isaiah Responds with Faith. *I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the descendants of Jacob. I will put my trust in him.*

*I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face. I will put my trust in him.* Ahaz would not wait for the Lord to handle the monster, for Ahaz the monster was the war plans of Israel and Aram. Ahaz would not trust in God. Isaiah put his trust in God.

We will end with the words of Habakkuk. Habakkuk was a prophet who lived about the same time as Isaiah, and heard a similar message from God. The monster Habakkuk feared was the famine monster, and it was a real monster. His prophecy ends with Habakkuk talking to himself, and making sure that he put God in his picture, along with the famine monster.

Habakkuk 3:16-19 *I heard, and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled.*

Habakkuk was terrified. Heart pounds, lips quiver, bones start to die, legs tremble. And people, that did not go away. He had no trick to make that go away. But he still could decide how he would talk to himself.

*Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us.*

Like Isaiah, who said, *I will wait on the Lord, who is hiding his face. I will put my trust in him.* Habakkuk will wait patiently for the Lord to act. And we need to understand that the act of God, that Habakkuk waits for, will not happen in his lifetime, and he knows it. He will not live to see this. Yet he will wait patiently for God to act.

And then he talks to himself about the famine monster and about God.

<sup>17</sup> *Though the fig tree does not bud, and there are no grapes on the vines,  
though the olive crop fails, and the fields produce no food,  
though there are no sheep in the pen, and no cattle in the stalls,*

<sup>18</sup> *yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.*

<sup>19</sup> *The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,  
he enables me to tread on the heights.*

Does his heart still pound, and his lips still quiver? Yes. Does he still feel like his bones are rotting, and can he still feel his legs shake? Yes, all of that is still true. And in that unhappy state, he worships God. He tells himself that although the famine monster is real and dangerous, God is far bigger, and God is with him. God will strengthen him and help him walk the high road.

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decay crept into my bones,and my legs trembled.  
Yet I will wait patiently for the Lord, for the day of calamityto come on the nation invading us.  
Though the fig tree does not bud,and there are no grapes on the vines,  
though the olive crop fails,and the fields produce no food,  
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The Sovereign Lord is my strength;he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,  
he enables me to tread on the heights.*

Prayer: Oh God, our Father in heaven, our heart pounds, our lips quiver, our legs tremble. We shake like a tree in a strong wind. We are anxious, anxious, anxious. We hear your warning, and your instruction. Help us never to ignore you when we are scared. We want you to be our strength, not our stumbling block.

You are always with us, O God. You never leave us or forsake us. Almighty God, your help and care never stop. You are the high and exalted King of Kings, and your glory fills the whole earth. We rejoice in this, and in our fear we worship you. From you, Almighty God, comes our strength. Having you is our strength. You, Almighty God, make our feet like the feet of a deer. Even when our enemies are alive and well, you nurture us and take care of us in their presence. You help us walk the high road of firm faith in your presence, and for this we praise you. Amen.