



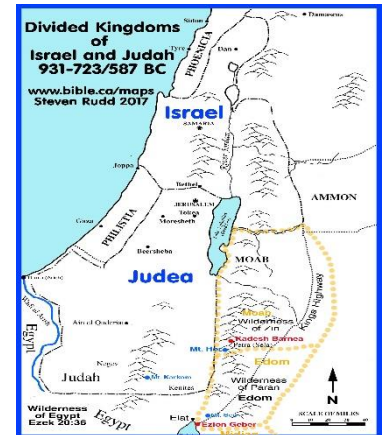
Advent 4

THE NEW SHOFAR

these waiting for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint...Isaiah 40:31

In the midst of a crushing darkness, God is at work

Our OT text is set against the larger and most violent backdrop of 8th century BC international politics and more particularly King Ahaz's refusal to ask God for a sign, a decision that is most likely tied to his *realpolitik* decision to seek protection from the Assyrian king. He was the wicked king of Judah (535-720), known in the Bible for his evil ways. He introduced pagan worship into the Temple, building an Assyrian-styled altar to replace the one used for the worship of Yahweh. He had similar altars erected on the street corners of Jerusalem and on the hilltops across the land. He is said to have even participated in child sacrifice. This sinful way of living led him to turn from trust in Yahweh to a reliance on the King of Assyria in his battles against the King of Israel (Pekah) and the King of Aram (Razin). For God, this was a sin as heinous as his many other moral failures. In the end, his evil ways laid down the foundation for the downfall of the Kingdom of Judah (586). The *Immanuel prophecy* came in a time of bitter crisis, turmoil, and conflict for Judah. The very survival of the nation of Judah appeared to be at risk. The prophesy comes near the end of this conflict between Judah and her northern neighbours.



Having tired of trying to force Ahaz to their side, Israel and Syria planned to set up their own puppet king in Jerusalem. Thus, Ahaz faces a second attack by Israel and Syria, and this is why *his heart and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind*. The very future of the house of David appeared to be severely threatened.

What does it take for men and women of faith to trust God unconditionally?

This is the divine promise he failed to heed... *and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever*. This guarantee was given by God to the prophet Nathan to give to King David. God was reassuring David that his kingdom would endure, that he had been chosen by God to play a pivotal role in the divine saving plan for creation. Nothing on earth, below the earth or below the earth could derail that. Certainly no human king, army or nation. And yet, here we are, a descendant of David, an ancestor sitting on the same throne declaring God cannot help him in *this* situation. Sometimes, he muses, God needs us to determine our own future, our own way.

Ahaz did not want God's help. He remained confident in his own abilities, his own wisdom and his own perspective on what was going on not knowing his days were now numbered.

The sign God offered instead was that of a child. Not an army to defeat the Assyrians but a child. A newborn, someone nobody would expect to solve the military destruction coming Israel's way. Rubbing salt in to wound, before the child was able to discern between good and evil, both Rezin and Pekah would be dead. This child was living proof that God was among his people. No one could stop or derail God. God will fulfil the divine promises made to David by Nathan.

The sign is also a divine pledge: Immanuel – God with us (always)

This child we know as the *boy child Jesus Christ* and in biblical language he is the **Amen** for all of the promises God made to His people... *for in him every one of God's promises is a "Yes"* (**2 Corinthians 1:20**). While the original promise most likely referred to a woman around the time of Ahaz there was a deeper message. God is a faithful God, one on whom all people can have absolute confidence. No matter what their circumstances. Isaiah is reassuring them of a reality of which they are already aware but have forgotten in the heat of the moment. Surely there was no way they could withstand the force of Aram, Israel and the Assyrians! Surely even God has limits? Surely this problem is not only too much for me, it is too much for God as well – or it is something in which God is not concerning Himself?

This is surely one of the great joys of Christmas. The divine reassurance and comfort to those who are searching for something beyond the "now", beyond the normal solutions that never seem to last through to the next "crisis". There are times when we can be a little like Ahaz in that we forget about what God is offering: Himself. The Father alive in Christ Jesus, the Risen and Reigning Son of God. Always and everywhere, in all things. That is what Immanuel means. Therein is our hope and the hope of the world.

It is hopeless really when we consider the enormity of the task given to us at our baptisms, the mission we have taken on with our membership of a Christian faith community. In a world that is at least agnostic, how are we meant to grow the Church, to share the Gospel and bring others to know, love and serve Almighty God? There are too many reasons against "success" in this, too many of our own versions of "Assyria" and we are all too well aware of our own limitations and paucity of resources. These excuses are only valid, though, if we leave out God's gift of Immanuel, a gift alive and working away in the major crisis as well as the silly foibles of our own human existence.

And then Jesus commanded us...*make disciples of everybody, and know that I am with you forever.* This vocation given to us by the Risen Christ is nothing less than a share in the very same mission and ministry given to him by his Father. He reminds us that if it is truly mission in which we are engaged, then it cannot be without God's presence. If God is with us (Immanuel) then nothing can stop the divine plan from achieving its purpose.

Christmas is the time God invites us to renew our lives in Him, a renewal taking place when we welcome the child Jesus into our lives and respond to the invitation of the Baptist to tweak our lives a little so that we can more fully, more enthusiastically and more joyfully radiate God's love to those who most urgently need it – whether they know it or not. Let us not forget the psalmist's joy...*But you O Yahweh are a shield around me, my glory, and the lifter up of my head. I cried aloud to the Lord and he answered me...Psalm 3:3-5*