

## *Preparation for Preaching: “Who is this King of Glory?”*

Ruth Anne Reese  
Professor of New Testament  
Asbury Theological Seminary  
ruthanne.reese@asburyseminary.edu

### **Background**

Let me begin by providing a little background to the sermon below. This sermon was written for and preached at Apostles Anglican Church on the fourth Sunday of Advent in December of 2019. As a liturgical church, Apostles makes use of a lectionary, and the four lectionary readings for the Sunday are listed below. The lectionary usually contains an Old Testament reading, a Psalm, a New Testament reading, and a Gospel reading. During special seasons such as Advent, Christmas, and Easter, among others, texts are deliberately chosen that are related to or interpret one another. For example, in the texts that are listed below, Matt 1:23 contains a quotation from Is 7:14. Such deliberate interweaving of the Old and New Testaments invites the preacher to contemplate the relationship between the texts as well as the message that might be communicated in light of that relationship. Although the other two lectionary texts for Advent 4 do not connect as directly to the Old and New Testament readings, they serve to bolster the unfolding identity of the King (Messiah) in the Gospel reading in particular. When I prepare a sermon, continual focused prayer along with close reading of the assigned texts and doing some research on those texts all work together towards the preparation of the sermon. In this particular case, I intended to preach on Psalm 24 with a focus on “The King of Glory.” But as I continued praying and reading and studying, the sermon took a different direction. When a sermon is prepared in a state of prayer, these unexpected turns may be the direction of the Holy Spirit assisting the preacher in grasping the message of the text and its proclamation for the church today. While it might be usual to think about how the Old Testament was quoted in the New Testament, that was not the main focus of the sermon. Instead, I began to

focus on the two main characters (Ahaz and Joseph) in these texts and to notice that there was a parallel between these texts. Both of the characters in these texts received a messenger and a message from God. I began to think about how the responses of these two characters differed from one another and what we might learn from those two different responses. In addition, I also wanted to understand more about what the messenger and message told us about God and about the kind of invitation God might make to people. Because of this focus on the characters in the narratives, the sermon came to focus more on the presence and arrival of Emmanuel and the invitation to participate in God’s unfolding plans while still mentioning Ps 24 and the King of Glory. The sermon, as you see it below, touches on all four of the lectionary texts while focusing on the two most closely related texts: Isaiah and Matthew. One of the joys of preaching a sermon like the one below is that it helps the church to understand the deep connection between the Old and New Testament. Both tell of the ways and purposes of God and both are sources from which to proclaim the good news about the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

**Lectionary Texts for Advent 4:** Isa 7:10–17; Ps 2:3; Matt 1:18–25; Rom 1:1–7

## Opening Prayer

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

## Who is this King of Glory?

King Ahaz was under pressure. He was the ruler of a small tribal kingdom with Jerusalem as its capital. While, he might look back to the glory days of the united kingdom when his ancestors David and Solomon ruled over the whole of Israel and the land was at peace, his current troubles gave him little time to contemplate the success of his ancestors 200 years ago. Instead, his attention was given to the military pressure he was under from a coalition of surrounding kingdoms. To his north, the kingdom of Israel was paying tribute to the Assyrian Empire now under the capable rule of Tiglath-Pileser III who wielded a strong standing army. Already large chunks of the northern kingdom

of Israel had been annexed to the Assyrian Empire. Indeed, some of the people had been deported and forcibly relocated to other parts of that large Empire. Now, the Emperor of Assyria was on the march again, and he would be coming through Israel, Judah, Syria, and other neighboring tribal kingdoms to reassert his power and lay claim to tribute from those that looked to Assyria for protection. Ahaz can see the writing on the wall—either pay tribute to Assyria and hopefully survive or join the rebellion and be destroyed. And then...two leaders of neighboring kingdoms come to him seeking a coalition to rebel against Assyria. When he refused to join, they attacked him and captured many people from his kingdom and defeated his army. It is at this point that he receives the prophetic word and sign from Isaiah. In this military context, he looks to the strong and mighty emperor of Assyria for help, and that great Emperor responds swiftly to destroy those threatening neighbors.

Now, we shouldn't think that military pressure is separate from civil and religious realities. As a lesser king who has sought help from Assyria, Ahaz must pay tribute. How would Ahaz pay? He paid by liquidating the treasures of God's temple (2 Kings 15:8). In addition, Ahaz constructed shrines to foreign gods throughout his kingdom. He reasoned that the gods of those who had defeated him were stronger than his own god. Therefore, the worship of those gods should be encouraged. Ahaz turned the whole kingdom of Judah towards the worship of foreign gods. And, as if that were not enough, he sacrificed his own sons to the fire of foreign gods (a practice sometimes attributed to the Assyrians and prohibited by the God of Israel).

This is the king that Isaiah meets at the beginning of chapter 7. He is a king who is living in fear—shaking like a forest in a wind storm (Is 7:2)—and he is busy doing the best he can in light of the situation by securing the water supply for his city (7:3). A city without water in the midst of a siege is a death trap. There, beside the conduit, Isaiah encourages Ahaz to stand firm in faith and warns him that his failure to do so would result in his destruction (Is 7:9). Then, Ahaz is offered a sign from the Lord as a means of encouraging and strengthening his faith. The sign is that a young woman will give birth to a son and name him Emmanuel and that before the baby is old enough to know good from evil, the two kings who are threatening Ahaz will be destroyed. Here, I want to point out two things: first, Ahaz was not particularly a person of faith (especially as described in the historical books of Kings and Chronicles), yet God speaks to him calling him to steady, calm faithfulness; second, God is willing to provide a sign accompanied by

a promise to this king. Here some have suggested that the baby that is born is Ahaz’s own son, perhaps Hezekiah, who will go on to be one of the righteous kings of Israel in contrast to his father.

God gave the sign and the promise, and God was faithful. The kings were destroyed as God promised, and Ahaz and the kingdom of Judah survived both the advances of other tribal groups and the machinations of the great empire of the day—still, Ahaz did not change his ways. He continued to be a leader who encouraged idolatry (the worship of anything that is not God) and who plundered the place of God to secure the future of the kingdom. Chronicles describes Ahaz this way: “In the time of his distress he became yet more faithless to the LORD” (2 Chron 28:22) and concludes “[the gods he worshipped] were the ruin of him, and of all Israel” (2 Chron 28:23c).

In this passage from Isaiah we see that God speaks, God gives a sign and a promise, God fulfills his promise. God secures a future for Israel, for the throne and house of David even when a king like Ahaz sits on the throne. God secures a way forward, and we will see this in an even greater fulfillment of the sign he first gave to Ahaz.

We meet Ahaz again in Matt 1:9 where he is listed as one of the ancestors of Jesus. The purposes of God trace their way through the faithless and the faithful. God’s speech, God’s signs, God’s promises—these are not solely dependent on the response of those to whom they are given.

In the first chapter of Matthew we meet another “son of David.” Indeed, Matthew opens his gospel with the name “Jesus Christ son of David son of Abraham” (Matt 1:1). Matthew’s reader is invited to meet Jesus, whose name means “savior,” and who is the chosen king, descended from David, the one who received God’s promise of an eternal throne. And, the reader is reminded that Jesus is a descendant of Abraham, the head of the first household that God chose and with whom he covenanted to bless the whole world. Now, Matthew begins his biography of Jesus by tracing his lineage from Abraham through David and the exile to Joseph. This son of David, Jesus, has come, and we hear the story of his miraculous birth. And that story in Matthew’s gospel is focused on Joseph, the only other person in Matthew’s gospel identified as a son of David.

The story of Jesus’ birth happened like this. His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph. In the first-century this meant that Mary and Joseph were already legally husband and wife, but they had not yet

consummated their marriage or exchanged their final vows. Betrothal could only be ended through divorce or the death of the man or the woman. The usual period for a betrothal was about 12 months. While Mary and Joseph were betrothed, Mary was found to be with child. We are specifically told that this child comes into being through the work of the Holy Spirit. Here we pause to remember that the Spirit is often God's means of creating and doing new things in this world. Now, the Holy Spirit is at work in Mary to create and bring forth saving life, the life of the Son of God. Of course, Joseph finds out that Mary is pregnant, and he knows this isn't his baby. So, he begins pondering what to do about the situation and comes to the conclusion that the right thing to do is to divorce her. However, I want you to note the kind of character that Joseph has. First, he is described as "righteous." In other words, he was a man who tried to do what was fair and just and right in accordance with the laws that God had established for Israel. Second, he was not vengeful. It would have been within his rights to announce Mary's moral failing to the community (and indeed in another time the punishment for adultery would have been stoning), but Joseph did not want to humiliate Mary or shame her and her family before the village full of people who would have known her from childhood. Instead, he determined to divorce her quietly. Third, Joseph was thoughtful. He pondered what to do about the situation and didn't rush to action. In fact, after he had thought about these things, he went to sleep. That's when he had a dream. In the dream an angel of the Lord showed up and spoke to him. The angel told him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife. The angel tells him that the reason he does not need to be afraid is because the baby that Mary carries is from the Holy Spirit and she will bear a son. And, the angel goes on to tell him that Joseph will be the one to name the baby, and the name Joseph is to speak over this baby is Jesus—a form of Joshua—meaning Savior. What kind of Savior will this baby grow up to be? Not the great military leader fighting to secure the promised land of Israel but another kind of warrior a warrior who will save his people from their sins. And then Matthew tells us that all this took place to fulfill the word of the Lord in Isaiah, a virgin will conceive and bear a son and will call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us. And then notice the final piece about Joseph. He is a man who obeys the Lord. He got up from his sleep and he did what the angel commanded him to do. Instead of ending his betrothal with a divorce, he finalized his marriage. And Joseph abstained from consummating the marriage until after Mary had

given birth. Then, Joseph named the baby Jesus and in so doing assumed the position of Jesus’ legal father. This is the story of the miraculous birth of Jesus, but it is also the story of Joseph, a righteous, thoughtful man who listened to God and was willing to change the plans that he had made.

Now, I want to take a moment to compare and contrast Ahaz and Joseph. Ahaz is the ruler of Israel, and he is living with terror. In the midst of his dread, the Lord sends a messenger to Ahaz to encourage him to stand firm and to offer him a sign and promise to remind him that the Lord is with him and for him. Despite this message, Ahaz, according to the historical accounts, continues to be a leader who seeks his status and security not from God but from the great empire of his time.

Similarly, Joseph is also in a difficult situation, under pressure. After all, what would people say about Mary if he divorced her? What would they say about the two of them...pregnant before the final vows? And when he was facing the most challenging situation of his life, God sent a messenger to him, an angel who came in a dream. This messenger gives Joseph the courage to trust that the child Mary bears is a work of the Holy Spirit, to take Mary as his wife, and to adopt Jesus as his son. This man of faith had the opportunity to live the fulfillment of prophecy in his own family because of his faithfulness. If he had continued on his own course, pursuing his own wisdom, the savior would still have been born, but Joseph would have missed the blessing of being the legal father of the Savior. He would have missed the opportunity to be the father of the one who delivers his people from their sins.

In both cases, God’s activity was faithful and sure. In both cases a baby was part of God’s saving activity. But we never see Ahaz changing course. Instead, the historical books describe Ahaz giving his sons over to foreign gods; meanwhile, in Matthew, God entrusts his only son to Joseph. It’s so interesting, when I stop to think about Joseph, it becomes clear that wanting to do the right thing was not enough to lead Joseph to the right decision. He needed an encounter with God’s messenger. It was his openness to hear that messenger that allowed him to receive the blessing God had for him—the blessing of being entrusted with the son of God.

And here I might pause for just a moment to ask this question. Aren’t we all entrusted with the Son of God? Isn’t each one of us invited to bear him in our hearts and lives each and every day? We are. And, if we take up the example of Joseph, it is not enough to try to be



a good person, to try to do right by people. It is not enough to try to ponder all the things we've encountered and then forge ahead with our own wisdom. We need an encounter with God's messenger to help us see what is brought into being by the Holy Spirit, the Son of God. It helps to be a person who is fair and just and thoughtful, but the attentive ear and obedient heart are also necessary to hear the message God has for us. What is this message?

God is with us. The Savior of the world is here. The Savior will save his people from their sins. And isn't this good news? We are not alone in this world. God is here. God is present. And, we do not have to save ourselves. We already know that we can't save ourselves. We can't save ourselves from the sin of pride that says "Look at us, look at all our human ingenuity. Some day our medical advances will conquer death itself." We can't save ourselves from the sin of despair, "The whole world is falling to pieces. Everything is hopeless. There's nothing we can do. Let's just give up." And all the other sins—the sins we have done to others—the betrayals, the greed, the self-centeredness, shading the truth—and the sins that have been done to us—abuse, gossip, mocking—and the sin of failing to trust. All these and more. And all the hurt and anger and rage and shame built up in and among us. We cannot save ourselves from our sins and from the effects and consequences of our sin. But this baby, Jesus, Savior, will fight a mighty battle with sin and death and Satan to save his people from their sins. Who is this Savior? He is the Son of God. Paul speaks of him in Romans as the one promised through the prophets—prophets like Isaiah. He is a descendant of David and the divine Son of God. Through his resurrection we fully know his identity as the divine Son, the one who comes in power. We might use the words of Psalm 24 to identify him as the King of Glory, a king mighty in battle. But he was first seen when he was born to a young married couple staying in Bethlehem in a humble home.

Today, we are invited to trust the sign and the promise of God's message to us, the message revealed in the baby Jesus: God is with us. The Savior is here, and he is able to save his people from their sins. What we cannot do for ourselves, God can do for us. Do you know He is near? Do you trust him?

Today we are invited to be like Joseph—righteous, thoughtful, obedient—willing to change our plans in order to participate in the plans of God. And like Joseph we too are entrusted with a great blessing, the blessing of bearing the Son of God in this world. What kind

of character is God inviting you to have? And how will that help you hear his message? What plans have you made? Are you willing to alter them when the Lord speaks? Is it the longing of your heart to participate in the plans of God?

And, I think we have one more invitation, the invitation to be the messengers of God. In each of these stories, there was a divinely appointed messenger who drew the attention of Ahaz and Joseph and communicated the message and plans of God. We, the church, are also invited to be God’s messengers, and he has given us a wonderful message to share. It is really simple: God is with us. Who do you know that needs to hear that message today? Who do you know who needs to be reminded that God is near, that God is revealed to us through Jesus, the Son of God in the flesh. Who do you know that needs to hear that God participates with us in the joys and struggles and challenges of this life. And who do you know that needs to be reminded that there is only one Savior in this world and that Jesus has fought a mighty battle against sin to set us free from sin and to enable us to love and serve this King of Glory? We, God’s church, have been God’s witnesses for millennia that what we could not do for ourselves, God has done for us. Today we are invited to participate in God’s plan to redeem the whole world by sharing the simple message that God has drawn near through his Son and will save his people from their sin.

Know this: God is faithful. His promises are sure. His message is true. And his Son, Jesus the Christ, the King of Glory, God with us, the Savior of the world is here.

Amen.



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