

“WHAT’S YOUR SIGN?”

December 21, 2025 Isaiah 7:10-16

Do any of you remember watching the **Dating Game?** It was a classic American television game show that first aired on December 20, 1965. (60 years ago as of yesterday) It was created by Chuck Barris and ran off and on from the 60's to the 80's. **Jim Lange** hosted the early Dating Game episodes. The show had several guests who later on became famous such as **Farrah Fawcett, Tom Selleck, and Lee Majors.** They also used many contemporary songs, ranging from those of Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass to pop music used for celebrity guest and band appearances.

The Dating Game was played by featured a **bachelorette** who would ask silly questions of three **bachelors** hidden from her view by a wall. Depending on how the bachelors answered her questions, the bachelorette would make her date of choice. Next would come the big reveal. The two unchosen bachelors would come around the wall and meet the woman. With a little build up the chosen man would appear and greet the waiting gal. The couple didn't actually win any money but the show's producers, did pay for the first date, usually an "all-expenses-paid" mini vacation at a resort or other destination. Interestingly, a few of these couples went from the date, to dating, to the altar.

We could describe the Old Testament as a written record of a dating game between God and the Hebrew people. God as the bachelorette, had chosen this people through the covenant agreements given to **Abraham,**

Moses, and David. While God set the terms of the relationship, the Lord also bound himself to the welfare of his people. As with any good relationship, it was built on trust and commitment. All went well until the people decided they wanted to date other gods because they didn't really trust this covenant making God. They wanted a god made in their own image, one they could set the terms of the marriage, not one based on trust and commitment. We find an example of this problem in our scripture this morning.

King Ahaz, who ruled over the southern kingdom of Judah from roughly 735 to 715 BCE, is approached by the prophet Isaiah. In terms of faith, Ahaz was a dating failure, and that is just one of his many issues. At the moment he is facing a crisis in the form of two invading armies. The countries of Syria and Israel want Jerusalem and Judah to join them in rebellion against Assyria, the major power in the area. Ahaz refuses their invitation and instead makes peace with Assyria. As a result these two nations come to conquer Judah. Ahaz is afraid, so God sends the prophet Isaiah to reassure him that he can rest in peace. Nothing will come of the conflict, only trust in the Lord.

I. ASK FOR A SIGN

The fun part of the **Dating Game Show** was you never knew who the **bachelorette** was going to choose to be her date. I always wondered what was going through her mind, what did she use to make her decision. Was it the way the bachelors introduced themselves, the way they

answered questions, the one who made her laugh, a common interest, or did she just toss a mental coin and hope for the best? While the audience could see the bachelors, the bachelorette was making a date sight unseen. All she had was the sound of potential suitors' voices.

Isn't that often our struggle with faith? Most of the time all we have is the voice of God, usually in the form of the word of God, well, that and our experience of God. But when we have difficult decisions to make, when we are faced with a crisis, when the future outcomes are unknown, and when we are dealing with moral dilemmas, it is a challenge to our faith to trust in just a voice. We want something more, we want some form of assurance that we are on the right track, that we are doing the right thing. We want a sign before we are willing to take a leap of faith.

Fortunately, we have a gracious God who has revealed himself through **signs**. There is no guarantee we will receive a sign, but Adam got a garden, Moses saw a burning bush, dreams came to Abraham, a rainbow was given to Noah, and we could make a sign list. Even the Gospel of John refers to the miracles of Jesus as signs. More importantly, all these signs pointed to the promises and assurances that God is faithful and will do the things he said he would do.

God promises to deliver Ahaz and Jerusalem from the current crisis, and instead of Ahaz asking for a sign of assurance, Isaiah tells the king, "**Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.**" Wow, that is quite an offer! Basically, Ahaz can ask for just

about any sign he desires. Instead, Ahaz replies, “**I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.**”

This might sound very pious and holy on the surface, but don’t be fooled. Ahaz doesn’t want a sign from the Lord because he doesn’t want to listen to Isaiah or God. He is not willing to trust in the Lord and would rather rely on political tactics. He is actually testing the Lord by refusing a sign.

And this is the tragedy of history. No matter how many promises and signs God gives it doesn’t bring people to faith, it doesn’t get them to trust and love God, it doesn’t get us to surrender to the relationship. The good news is God doesn’t give up on us.

II. THE NAME IS IMMANUEL

Once there was a mother who was on the lookout for a unique name for her newborn child. While walking down a street she saw on the door of a building the word “**Nosmo.**” It attracted her, and she decided that she would adopt it. Sometime later, passing the same building, she saw the name “**King**” on another door. She thought the two would sound well together, and so the boy was baptized, “**Nosmo King Smith.**”

On her way home from the church, where the baptism had taken place, she passed the building again. The two doors on which she had seen the names were now closed together, and what she read was not “**Nosmo King,**” but “**No Smoking.**”

Then Isaiah replies to king Ahaz and tells him whether you want it or not you're getting a sign from God. Like mom saying you're going to eat your broccoli and like it. **"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."** The sign is a child.

Now there is much debate among scholars as to who this **Immanuel** child was. With the strange name it could have been one of Isaiah's children. He named his other two sons Shear-jashaub – which means **a remnant shall return** and Mahr-shaelhasb-boz – which means **spoil speeds, prey hazens**. Because every child wants embarrassing names. But prophets were known to give their children unusual names that matched their prophecy. However, Immanuel doesn't quite fit here.

Most scholars believe this child sign was **Hezekiah**, the son of Ahaz and the future king. His name means "the **Lord was with him**". **Immanuel** means "**God with us.**" Hezekiah is the one who asks for and receives signs from God. He is the one who walks with the Lord and knew how to refuse evil. He is the sign of a turning point for Judah.

The good news was this child was God's sign to Judah that the military threat would be abated and historically it was. The bad news is the child spelled the end of Ahaz's reign. His replacement is coming and this was the last word of the prophet to him. He refused to follow the God of life and died. He refused to listen to God and God speaks with him no longer. The signs were all there and King Ahaz refused to heed them.

III. FLESH AND BLOOD

You heard about the student who was caught plagiarizing his book report. When the teacher asked him why he said, “**It was such a good story I thought it was worth repeating.**”

Plagiarism is a big deal in the modern world but in the times of the biblical writers it was rampant. There were no copyright laws. They would borrow images, words, and prophecies from antiquity and reshape them for their own use. Jesus does this, Paul does this, and the Gospel writers do this. On a certain level, I do this in writing a sermon. I use the ideas from a scripture passage, apply them to situations of today, and shape a sermon around them. However, I also study and try to understand scripture in its original context in order to come as close to the meaning as possible. The temptation is reading into the Bible, especially prophecy, and make it say what we want it to say. That can be dangerous and lead to gross distortions.

Case in point, this **Immanuel** passage from Isaiah is used by the Gospel of Matthew to prove Jesus was the fulfillment of prophecy, the Messiah, a big deal to his Jewish audience. But Matthew takes these words out of the original context they were spoken in and repurposes them to fit Jesus. There’s no indication here that this child will be a messiah or a savior — only that he represents “**God with us.**” And yet, “**Immanuel**” is certainly a great word for Jesus.

In the **Dating Game** the bachelors are just voices for most of the game. But at the end, when they come around the wall and hug the waiting young lady, things become real. Flesh and blood have a way of doing that. Their voices are now embodied. Isn't that what God does in Jesus? The word of God is now embodied. God with us! What better sign could we have than this? All the words of God to the people of Judah; I am your God and you are my people. I claim you as my own and I am with you always, and many more are not just heard but seen in Jesus the Christ.

Jesus is the ultimate sign of the living God and God's love for us. The good news is God hasn't abandoned us. Amid all the real-world problems, God is present. The Advent question is are we going to follow that sign to God? Are we going to surrender to its voice and trust in the Lord? Will we be present to God's loving presence? It's not a question of whether there are signs or not. For unto us a child is born, a son is given, and his name is Emmanuel. **Amen.**

First Presbyterian Church in Hawley
Sunday, December 21, 2025
Second Scripture Lesson

Isaiah 7:10-16

10 Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying,

11 "Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven."

12 But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test."

13 Then Isaiah said, "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals that you weary my God also?

14 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.

15 He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.

16 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.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be To God.