

DECEMBER 23

O EMMANUEL

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*O Emmanuel, king and lawgiver,
desire of the nations, Savior of all people,
come and set us free, Lord our God.*

In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, humankind became stunningly and at times disastrously aware that we are capable of shaping history and society. Social structures that were once thought to be the result of the eternal workings of Divine Providence have been exposed as human creations (or perhaps better desecrations). Our action in history can change these structures, foster anew a sense of radical peace and justice through promotion of the common good and solidarity. Yet, there is a dark side to our awakening to the possibility that we shape history, namely, we may begin to imagine that we *alone* are the creators of history—that human ingenuity and striving can enact the fullness of justice in the world. Such an approach eliminates any sense of God acting in history. On an individual level, we embrace a rough and ready ‘atheism’ (by no means an intellectual atheism), whereby every aspect of our lives unfolds solely according to our desires, our concerns, our interests. Our career choices, our relationships become a cultivation of the self apart from community. Simultaneously, we develop a society whose only concern is growth for its own sake, unaware of any transcendent good. In the United States, should we be surprised that Congress has found itself in an impossible gridlock, an inertia made possible through arguments that unfold not according to transcendent principles of truth and goodness, but the constraints of an all-too-consuming and addictive power?

In some ways, the present social and political reality finds its corollary in eighth century B.C., in the kingdom of Israel, under the reign of Ahaz. In an attempt to save Israel from destruction, King Ahaz sought to court the king of Assyria, to enter into a political alliance,

one in which there would be an inevitable capitulation to breaking the covenant with the Lord. For the covenant that Israel made on Mount Sinai was never simply about following a series of arbitrary laws. Rather, Israel's signing of the covenant was an agreement to live their existence entirely oriented toward the transcendent Lord, toward God alone. Even when Israel begs for a king and receives Saul, the narrative is quite clear: the nation, even the king, must rely on the Lord alone. The nation cannot surrender itself to the intrigues of power, of fame, and of fortune. The nation cannot ignore the Sabbath because of how it promotes inefficient labor practices, cannot despoil the orphan and the widow to increase profits, cannot enter into treaties with foreign empires to save itself from destruction. For such sins are an implicit denial that the Lord will act anew in history, *in this day*. That all power, all possibility for life, comes from the Lord alone. It is the prophet Isaiah (read with such frequency during this season of Advent), who speaks against Ahaz. In his classic text *The Prophets*, Abraham Heschel writes:

A gulf was separating prophet and king in their thinking and understanding. What seemed to be a terror to Ahaz was a trifle in Isaiah's eyes. The king, seeking to come to terms with the greatest power in the world, was ready to abandon religious principles in order to court the emperor's favor. The prophet who saw history as the stage for God's work, where kingdoms and empires rise for a time and vanish, perceived a design beyond the mists and shadows of the moment. (83)

It is within this context that the prophet Isaiah announces God's action in history through the birth of a child. The prophet writes:

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz:
Ask for a sign from the Lord, your God;
let it be deep as Sheol, or high as the sky!
But Ahaz answered, "I will not ask! I will not tempt the Lord!"
Then he said:
Listen, house of David!
Is it not enough that you weary human beings?
Must you also weary my God?
Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign;
the young woman, pregnant and about to bear a son,
shall name him Emmanuel. (Isaiah 7:10–14)

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The birth of the child is remarkable for two reasons. First, one should note that this birth is by no means ordinary, precisely because the child to be born is to carry out the Lord's desires for the nations. The child is a sign of God acting in history, of the refusal of the Lord to let humanity construct an order forgetful of the covenant. This child, so small, still in utero, will defeat nations precisely in orienting his existence entirely to the Lord. Second, and relatedly, the name of the child is to be Emmanuel, God with us. Despite Ahaz's (and thus the entire nation's) attempt to construct his own history, the Lord continues to dwell with Israel; the Lord does not forget, does not give up his end of the covenant. The salvation of Israel remains deeply entrenched in the mind of the Lord. Something novel, unimaginable will take place:

But a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse,
and from his roots a bud shall blossom.
The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him:
a spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
A spirit of counsel and of strength,
a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the Lord. (Isaiah 11:1–2)

Thus, when in the final O Antiphon, the Church proclaims that the Infant born in Bethlehem, Jesus, is Emmanuel, God with us, we make a remarkable claim. This Child, wrapped in swaddling clothes, is the very sign of God dwelling among us. This Child, so small, so devoid of power, is the Creator of the stars of night, the Savior of the world. God's definitive action in history is revealed not in pomp and circumstance but in the poverty of an Infant, who will give himself over to the will of the Father, even unto death itself. The presence of this Infant, who will reign upon the wood of the Cross, is a constant sign that we are not the sole creators of history. In fact, the accomplishments of history are a shadow of this hidden event in Bethlehem, one that transforms what it means to be human, to function as a society. As Benedict XVI wrote in an editorial for the *Financial Times* during his pontificate:

In Italy, many crib scenes feature the ruins of ancient Roman buildings in the background. This shows that the birth of the child Jesus marks the end of the old order, the pagan world, in

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which Caesar's claims went virtually unchallenged. Now there is a new king, who relies not on the force of arms, but on the power of love. He brings hope to all those who, like himself, live on the margins of society. He brings hope to all who are vulnerable to the changing fortunes of a precarious world. From the manger, Christ calls us to live as citizens of his heavenly kingdom, a kingdom that all people of good will can help to build here on earth.

The Christian, therefore, who adores Emmanuel, who proclaims the O Antiphon on this day, announces the newness of history as it unfolds in Christ. A history in which human love is transfigured through the self gift of the Christ, the anointed One, the Messiah who announces the radical reign of divine justice.

As we celebrate the feast of Christmas, we must learn to give up self sufficiency, the attempt to seize and control our own lives at all costs, to construct our own political order apart from any transcendent source. And instead, we must give ourselves over to the logic of love revealed in the poverty of the Infant. We cannot sentimentalize the presence of the birth of Jesus on Christmas day, for sentimentality ignores the historical magnitude of this birth, in which all human power—all attempts to construct our own historical narrative apart from the Lord of all nations—is defeated by the cooing of the Word made flesh.

Come and set us free, Lord our God.

