

There's big news happening these days. And I would be remiss not to mention something that means a lot of different things to a lot of different people right now... there's a new Star Wars movie in the theaters.

Now I'm not going to get into the movie itself, because I haven't seen it yet. I'm a little behind on the new Star Wars trilogy actually because I'm waiting for them to all be out so I can watch them all together at home. But there's something *in* the Star Wars movies as a whole that really fits with what I want to talk about today. I know there's probably a number of you *here* today who don't *care* about Star Wars, and that's fine—I like it, sure, but I'm not like a die-hard fanboy. But you can't deny the cultural impact it's had since the first movie came out in 1977.

I mean—show of hands—who here has, before today, *heard* the name Darth Vader? Raise your hands if that one sounds familiar.

See Darth Vader's the big bad in a number of the Star Wars movies. Big black suit, scary mask, stylish cape, spooky breathing problem. The first couple of movies we see him lording over the galaxy, crushing rebellions and exercising total control over everyone in his path. Pretty much a one-note evil space-fascist. But as each new movie came out after the first one, we came to realize that Darth Vader hadn't always *been* the big bad we were introduced to in 1977. You start to discover that he was *once* one of the good guys. A hero, in fact—a Jedi Knight who cared for the people he was sworn to defend, and who even fell in love.

But, because these movies are sci-fi/fantasy, the man who would become Darth Vader started having *visions* of the *future*, visions of his wife dying in childbirth. He came to believe that the only person who could help him save her was an *evil* Jedi who could use his *powers* to *control* life and death. He decided that in order to keep his wife from dying he would need to join forces with this powerful individual, and do whatever he could to protect and aid this nefarious figure, and in exchange, his wife and unborn child would be saved from the death he saw coming.

Well that man would go on to lead a bloody coup, and—with the help of Darth Vader—become the evil Emperor over the entire galaxy. The Emperor's ambitions ran unchecked, and many died and were enslaved.

When Vader's wife realized what he had done, and what he was willing to allow... it broke her heart, and ended up killing her. The future he was trying to prevent ended up being caused by his own decisions.

And with nothing left to tether him to the humanity he had sacrificed to prevent the future he feared... all that was good in him died with her. And so he became the Darth Vader on all the movie posters: a dark figure clinging to whatever control or domination he could grasp, because in the end it was all he had left.

Now Vader's story doesn't end there, and I won't spoil the end of a thirty-seven-year-old movie by getting into the attempts made to redeem such a tragic, sinful figure, because that's more of an Easter sermon, what with all the opportunities for repentance and forgiveness and resurrection. For now I want to stay... at the *start* of Vader's story. And what the choices *he* made have to do with *us*, and what they have to *teach* us. And what it all has to do with *Christmas* coming up in a few days.

Our Scripture reading for today is a hard one to understand out of context. It tells part of the story of King Ahaz, who ruled the kingdom of Judah a little over seven hundred years before the birth of Christ. Judah, which is the southern region of what became the modern-day nation called Israel, was constantly under threat by the nations to the north. Ahaz, from his throne in Jerusalem, could tell what was coming. The warring factions to the north were about to spill over into Jerusalem, and they would destroy and take from him and his people everything they held dear. This was a very real threat, one that Judah faced often throughout its history, and he needed to be prepared to meet it. But he—Ahaz—couldn't see a way out of this situation.

The two nations to the north, if they were to march south, they could not be defeated by the one nation of Judah. The math just wasn't on his side.

So he made a choice: a choice that would have far-reaching consequences.

How do you beat two nations from the north? Why with an even *larger* nation north of *them*. So he made preparations to appeal to the great and war-

like empire of Assyria in the far north—on the *back*-side of Judah’s enemies—to *steam*-roll over the two smaller nations in an effort to protect his homeland.

Now Ahaz, in his well-meaning attempt to solve an impossible situation, never once sought the wisdom of *God* in any of this.

The prophet Isaiah, spurred onward by the words of God, came to Ahaz as the king prepared to enlist the aid of the Assyrians... and told him to seek the help of God before he made a choice he couldn’t take back.

What it came down to was *this*, Isaiah said: Trust God’s promise that I give to you—that your people *will* be delivered from the aggression from the north—and let *faith, hope, and love* protect you from what’s to come... not the *swords and blood* of a *greater* evil than that which you face today.

But Ahaz couldn’t count on that. Faith, hope, and love protecting his people? He couldn’t even *picture* such a thing with sabers rattling and boots stomping outside his very borders. How could he trust in such an unrealistic solution?

But God tried again. Speaking through Isaiah the Lord said, ‘Ask me for a sign. Just ask, and I will show you what I have promised.’

And Ahaz, I can picture it now, probably bending over his desk putting the finishing touches on his desperate letter to Assyria—a savior he actually could *see* and *touch*—waved Isaiah off. ‘No, no, a godly man does not put God to the test.’

To which the mouth of the *prophet*—who knew what was up—replied with a sigh *dripping* with exasperation. “Is it too little for you to weary mortals, you must weary my God also?”

‘Fine,’ he said, ‘you’re getting the sign anyway. I hope you’re listening: “Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. 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 child, Immanuel, a word which means literally “God-With-Us,” is a promise from God, a promise that God is with you, even in the darkest, most impossible moments, and through this God that walks with us comes our deliverance. All of us, even Ahaz and his people.

But Ahaz couldn't see it. How is a child, being born at *some* point in the future, supposed to solve his problems here and now? So he ignores Isaiah's pleas to live in faith, hope, and love, and instead sends that letter to Assyria.

And wouldn't you know it, Assyria *does* solve Ahaz' problem. That and more. It marches through the northern threats handily... but it doesn't stop there. What nation with "Empire" in its name was ever any good at stopping?

In the end, it was the Assyrians, empowered by Ahaz and his choices, that laid waste to Judah.

The promise of *God* was not fulfilled in Ahaz' lifetime... and I wonder—I truly do—how *different* things would have gone if Ahaz had trusted in God's words to begin with.

And that leads to us. Two thousand seven hundred years later... we *have* the sign that God promised to Ahaz. The sign Ahaz wasn't interested in waiting for. The child *was* born. A child who was called Immanuel, "God-With-Us." A child we have come to know as Christ, the one who came to save us and to teach us. To show us a sign that there is a better way. A way paved with faith, hope, and love.

Jesus the Christ stands as a signpost for us, pointing the way to God's road: a road paved with love. Every one of Jesus' choices during his earthly life was motivated by love, suffused by love. And he called us to *trust* that love—that love that comes from God—in everything that we do.

Jesus tried to teach us to choose love over hate. Choose love over fear. Choose love over vengeance.

Choose love over... *practicality*.

Love isn't *practical*; love wasn't ever supposed to be *practical*. Loving your enemy, turning the other cheek, it doesn't make sense! There's nothing *sensible* about that.

But we are supposed to do what Ahaz couldn't, and trust God anyway. We are called to follow the way of Jesus and choose *love* every time we are faced with the choice. Jesus said if you forget everything else God's been trying to tell you since the dawn of your race, don't forget this: love God, love your neighbor, and love yourself just as much.

It's three choices we always have access to that all come from the same place. That love placed in the center of us that animates us, that makes us who we are, and that gives us a reason to go on. That love God made us out of and that love Christ was born on this Earth to show us really exists. And what we *do* with that love—that we all have the capacity for—*defines* us. As *Batman* once said, it's not who I am underneath, but what I *do* that defines me.

Immanuel, God-With-Us, the God who has been with us all along, since the start, and the God who loved us so much that it came to this Earth to suffer the pain and beauty we all do every day, that God that was born to us on Christmas Day wanted to *transform* who we are by transforming what we do.

King Ahaz wanted to trade everything that he was and compromise everything that was good and right in him because he couldn't see a way to transform the situation he and his people were in. There was *no* way that made sense but to fight fire with fire: to sell his soul for the sword that would strike down his enemies, for the sake of the world he hoped for.

"*Love* doesn't win wars. Love doesn't solve everything. Love isn't *all* you need. The world doesn't work like that."

"Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also?" Which I think is God-talk for, "Screw *that* noise." "The world doesn't work like that?" Well the world can shut up because *God is talking*.

Ahaz didn't trust God. He could dress it up in whatever flowery language he wanted to—*I will not put the Lord to the test...* but it played out in his actions. He put his trust in the sword of Assyria, and that's a sword that will not stop cutting once it's started. None of them ever do.

The things we choose to do when we decide we can't trust that love is the right option, *those* are the things that always come back to us. At Easter time we remember Jesus saying to Peter, "he who lives by the sword dies by the sword," or, put simply later in Galatians, "you reap what you sow." When

we—despite all our fear and all our hate and all our practical concern—when we do those three things Christ told us not to forget: love God, love one another, and love ourselves... when we sow love, so shall we reap. But when our fear or our inability to make sense or *trust* in that command causes us to sow otherwise... so do we reap.

Vader's fear of losing the woman he loved *led* to her death and the destruction of everything that was human in him... *because* he chose to respond to that fear with domination and control. Ahaz did the same kind of thing: he fanned the flames of evil and evil flourished.

And so it is.

All I can tell you this morning is what Christ was born to show us. The Christ who loved his enemies and died because of it. And the Christ who lived anyway. The Christ whose love was stronger than death. The Christ who came to transform us through love, to turn us away from the ways of the past—the ways of the world—and turn us toward a better way, a holy way... a way that makes no freaking sense. It didn't to Ahaz... but it's what we're *called* to all the same.

Whatever you do, whatever choices you make, whatever it is that gets you to put one foot in front of the other, whichever door you pick or button you press or decision you can never take back... it has to—it *has* to come from a place of love. Either it's love of God, it's love of your neighbor, or it's love of yourself.

We can't make choices from the fear inside us. We can't make choices from the hate inside us. We can't make choices from the skeptical, practical, cynical realism inside us. I mean *sure*, we *can*, we do it all the *time*. But Christ was born on Christmas day to show us the better way. The way that doesn't come back around to bite us. The way that doesn't *rot* us from the inside out.

It's not who we are on the inside, but what we do that defines us. Let it be *love* that defines us. And let the choices we make—and the things we choose *not* to do—define the world. That's the promise God made to Ahaz, and the promise Christ made to us. Refuse the evil and choose the good. That's what the child born on Christmas did, and maybe if we *trust* Him and *let* Him, that love can transform the world.

Here's hoping. Amen.