

Practicing fidelity: Isaiah 7:10-17; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

by [Rosalind Brown](#) in the [December 9, 1998](#) issue

Ahaz, Paul and Joseph were three men up against the inscrutability of God. One was a king whose rebellion exhausted God and led him to the brink of disaster and whose heart shook like a tree in the wind. One was a zealous Jew whose fidelity to the God of his ancestors made him a murderer and blinded him to the possibility that God's coming might not be as he anticipated. One was a righteous man, soon to be married, whose carpentry business was all the excitement he expected in life.

These were three men whose lives were thrown into turmoil when God came to them.

Ahaz's story, as told in Kings and Chronicles, has no moment of potential redemption. There is just the downward spiral of Ahaz's rebellious disobedience and God's anger. Simple cause and effect, it seems. But Isaiah's account throws a wrench into the works: God offers Ahaz the opportunity to ask for a sign--a down payment on God's intervention in the situation. Ahaz's refusal sounds wise, given the number of times the people of Israel have already been rebuked for testing God, but it masks a failure to distinguish between faithful and rebellious testing of God. Faithful testing is prepared to act on the outcome, whereas Ahaz's pious answer is a refusal to risk belief in God, a refusal to experience the love God longs to lavish on the king.

The invitation to Ahaz is actually double-edged; he thinks he is being invited to test God, to prove God true, but he himself is being tested by God's word (Ps. 105:19). So God asks Ahaz to pay attention to the names of children and sets up a contrast between Ahaz's lack of faith and the woman's great faith in naming her child "Emmanuel." If Ahaz cannot hear the subtext of Isaiah's son's name, "A remnant shall return," God will spell it out more clearly: "God is with us." The king's actions tell us he does not believe this, but a young woman can and does. In a good mystery novel, clues are scattered throughout the book. Seemingly inconsequential details are deliberately added by the author, who makes sense of them all at the end. That is what God is doing with Ahaz. A clue here, "ask me for a sign"; a clue there, "a child's name." But Ahaz, conditioned by a lifetime of ignoring God, cannot or will not

seize this moment of grace.

Ahaz's whole life has been based on the assumption that God won't come to him. So, given his refractory history, why is Ahaz offered a sign of God's presence and power while righteous Joseph is not? It would seem to be so easy for the angels, already working overtime in the Nazareth and Bethlehem area, to put in an appearance to Joseph and make it all clear from the beginning. It would spare him, as well as Mary and her parents, a lot of agony. Instead, God leaves Joseph with the dilemma of what to do when a lifetime of fidelity to God is suddenly rewarded with seeming disaster. And, to make matters worse, God appears to be silent. How is Joseph going to risk belief in God and act faithfully? How will Joseph put God to the test?

Being a righteous man, Joseph tries to put the pieces of his jigsaw puzzle together using the template of the law of God and his own compassion for Mary. But he is working with the wrong picture, because God is at this very minute putting the finishing touches on a new one. The God who last week was a highway engineer making new ways through the wilderness, a gardener turning deserts into flower gardens, is now the artist painting a new perspective of the age-old promise of the messiah. Hope in God cannot stand still, because--as Isaiah reminds us elsewhere--we hope in a God who is constantly doing a new thing.

The initial silence of God to Joseph was just as demanding for him as the clarity of God's words was for Ahaz. In both situations God was testing the men: Are you going to act faithfully? Does your hope in God hold fast in the face of chaos and confusion in your life? Ahaz, can you live with the clear word of God? Righteous Joseph, can you live with the silence of God?

Paul brings it all together. Once intransigent on God's behalf, Paul knows himself to be a servant of Jesus Christ and writes of the obedience of faith. That was Joseph's response too. Faith knows in whom it has believed, and orders life accordingly, despite unanswered questions. In contrast to Paul and Joseph, Ahaz's knowledge of himself as king precludes knowing himself as God's obedient servant.

Joseph's fidelity should remind us that often the times of silence or awkward questions are the prelude to new works of God in our lives. Advent is a time of preparation for the coming of God, a time to pay attention to the clues that God is active, a time to practice the scales of fidelity that will enable us to play the new music when God puts it in front of us. Sometimes it is only those who have learned to maintain their hope during God's silences who can be trusted with hearing God's

word spoken to their situation; only those who have been tested by God's word can embrace without hesitation the unanticipated presence of God.