

Pre-event Study for December 2023 workshops:

## Fastening Ourselves in Shaky Times: Advent Wisdom from Isaiah 7-9

by Ted Lewis

*The following is an optional study guide for those who want to extend their engagement with the themes of the workshop ahead of time. One recommendation is to jot down answers to the study questions at the end and bring them to the workshop with you.*



Our starting-point theme verse is **Isaiah 7:2**

**“Aram has allied itself with Ephraim so the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind.”**

The political context is that the two nations north of Judah (around 735 BCE) conspired together, and their joint armies pressed upon Jerusalem, though without complete success. The goal was to pressure King Ahaz in Jerusalem into a larger alliance to strengthen regional resistance against the greater superpower further north, Assyria. Predictably, the Judean leaders and people were afraid; they sensed that their security was eroding left and right. Should they join the two nations in resistance or should they make a counter-alliance with Assyria? Either way could prove costly. And what about Egypt?



Isaiah, seer and advisor to Ahaz, is not supportive of any political alliance. His message is essentially one that focuses more on God as a true source of security. “If you do not stand firm in your faith,” he says, “you will not stand at all” (7:9b). Inserting the Hebrew term... “If you do not *amen* you will not be *amened*.”

We get our prayer-ending ‘amen’ from this Hebrew word for faith and faithfulness. This root word means to “make firm,” which links to the act of “affirming” something. “Amen to that!” we might say, giving our approval.

Already you can see how the word ‘fastening’ in the workshop title *ties in* here (pun intended). When sailors fasten a rope, they make something shaky, such as a sail, much firmer. “Hold fast!” they might say to each other, as they work with ropes during strong winds. “Hold fast to what is good,” Paul writes to those in Rome.

Isaiah is asking the Judeans to hold fast to their faith. Their best alliance is their alliance with God. “God is with us,” he announces more than once. The plans of the surrounding nations cannot stand (8:10). But the fearful hearts of the people are shaken, and Isaiah knows that God is giving him a strong word to not “follow the way of this people” (8:11).

**“Do not call conspiracy everything that these people call conspiracy;**

**Do not fear what they fear and do not dread it.**

**The LORD (Yahweh) Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy,**

**He is the one you are to fear” (8:12)**

This is interesting, and there is a lot more in chapter 8 to unpack than I will attempt in this study. On one hand there really is a conspiracy at hand involving outside political players and inside adherents; on the other hand, an overreaction to this scenario on the part of some in Jerusalem may have amplified the threat by adding more ‘drama-content’ to the conspiracy of regional alliance. Perhaps in our modern context we experience a bit of these two polarities:



This is not the space to nuance out all the implications regarding the loaded term “conspiracy theory” as it is used in our current context. What I emphasize here is how **fear is a major driver** at either end of the continuum. Isaiah’s concern is how fear erodes faith. We also can see how a firm faith in God need not make us unengaged with the pressing issues of our day, but rather it strengthens our capacity for complexifying hard issues with critical realism. There is no real civic dialogue without this middle zone. I think a lot of people would like to be in this “radical middle” zone, but our media world, both official and reactionary, pushes people into two oppositional camps.

### Questions for reflection and journaling:

1. How have you personally felt shaken by the events and trends of our times over the past four years? How have you seen others shaken by our times?
2. When fear plays a role in your responses to intense social matters, do you favor official stances to find stability or reactionary stances? Are you able to identify or experience aspects of a middle zone with respect to your own thinking or dialogue with others?
3. How does a faith-based, Godward orientation possibly make a difference during shaky times? What does this really look like in practical, daily terms? Is there someone you admire who does well to 'hold fast' when the winds of time blow harder and unpredictably?



### For further study if you have time and interest.

Read all of Isaiah 7-9 in one sitting.

Isaiah states: **"Here am I, and the children the LORD has given me. We are signs and symbols in Israel from the LORD" (8:18)**

Throughout these chapters we learn of 4 child-signs given by God as messages to the people. What is it about babies and children that could possibly encourage a people who are shaken severely by their times?

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