

It's only five words, but those words can hit a parent quite hard. "I can do it myself!" It starts out with eating with a spoon and getting dressed. "Mom, I can do it myself!" Time goes on and the issue becomes assembling the new toys and using the phone, or buying clothes and driving to Ridgedale alone to shop. "Dad, I can do it myself!"

Those words can cut two ways through a parent's ears. On the one hand, one takes pleasure and pride at seeing a spirit of independence grow in a child. A parent wants to encourage that sense of self-confidence and that willingness to test one's wings when it surfaces. Such self-assurance is a major step on the road to maturity and becoming a self-reliant, responsible adult.

Still, that phrase can be extremely frustrating. Sometimes a parent fears, or even knows for certain, that their son or daughter is not able to do something on their own yet. What sounds like healthy self-assurance can be in reality a dangerous over-confidence. One challenge of being a parent is trying to discern the difference between the self-assurance and over-confidence.

This is also true of our relationship with God. We often speak of God as being like a parent to us, with us being the children of God. As God's children, we have that same tendency to say, "I can do it myself." I can work through my grief myself. I can handle my problems at work or in my marriage myself. I can lick my alcoholism myself.

Unfortunately, we often get the things we can do ourselves and the things that require God's help mixed up. We are quick to look at the enormity of the problems of hunger and affordable housing and say "I can't do anything about that," when in reality those are problems that we **CAN** handle without God's help. There is no shortage of food on this planet – there **IS** a distribution problem. There is no shortage of materials to provide adequate housing for everyone – there **IS** a lack of determination to correct the problem.

There are many areas in our lives in which God would love to have us say, "Love our neighbor as our self? We can do that on our own!"

On the other hand, there are times when we all too quickly tell God, "I can do it myself" when this claim is presumptuous. King Ahaz in our First Reading is an example of this. You might not know much about Ahaz. He's not exactly one of the main characters in the Bible. So let me give you a little background.

Ahaz was king in Jerusalem more than 700 years before Jesus was born. He was a descendant of King David, and as king he was supposed to be a model for his people in their relationship with the LORD God. Ahaz' faith in God, however, was marginal at best. He had no personal interest in religion. He believed that all his authority and wealth were directly attributable to his own talent and hard work. But being a politician (in the worst sense of that term) Ahaz knew he could use religion to further his career. So he always used the right words when it came to talking about God, even though those words really had no meaning for him.

In the passage we read this morning, Ahaz is facing an impending invasion by Israel and Syria, his neighbors to the north. The situation was grim and there was little hope that Ahaz and the army of Judah would be able to repel the invasion. As Ahaz is laying his plans, the prophet Isaiah comes to him with a message from the Lord which says, "Ask me for a sign, whatever you wish, and I will show you that I am with you and you have nothing to fear."

To this, Ahaz responds very properly, "I refuse to put the LORD to the test." It may sound as if Ahaz is saying, "God doesn't have to prove anything to me. I know that God is with me."

But Isaiah senses that Ahaz is using a false piety to cover up his lack of trust in God. Despite what he says, Ahaz is really thinking, “Don’t bother me with talk about signs from God. I don’t need God. I can do this myself.”

To which God replies through Isaiah, “No, Ahaz, you’re in over your head this time. You can’t do this yourself. So I’m going to intervene to help my people. And this will be a sign to you: The young woman standing over there is pregnant. She will bear a son and name him Immanuel, which means God is with us. By the time he is old enough to know the difference between good and evil, in a couple of years, the two kings you fear will be defeated. This sign will be a reminder to you that even you, the king, are dependent on me.”

Those words were spoken to a specific situation in the life of Ahaz, but the story also describes the general situation between humankind and God. For thousands of years men and women have been trying to make sense out of the world they live in and find some ultimate meaning and value in their lives. We look for a sense of purpose in life and it is only natural that we try to do it ourselves. We assign ultimate meaning to our work, or to our families, or to our possessions, or to someone we love. But all those things are ephemeral – here one day and gone the next – wiped out by death or economic depression or natural catastrophe.

The witness of generations of the Christian church asserts that the purpose of creation cannot be found apart from the Creator and the meaning of life cannot be found apart from the Giver of Life. God knows that this is something we cannot discover by ourselves, so God has taken the initiative to reveal it to us.

Matthew’s gospel begins with what is essentially a long title: “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” If you have been with us the past 15 weeks making our way through the Narrative Lectionary and the overarching story of the Old Testament, you recognize how filled with meaning these terms are. The son of Abraham – one who stands within the 3-fold covenant God made with Abraham of a land, many descendants, and that through these descendants God would bless all the people of earth. The son David – one who stands within the covenant God made with David that a descendent of his would shepherd God’s people. The Messiah – the one the prophets of the Exile (Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Habakkuk, and Second Isaiah) foretold would be the fulfillment of all of God’s promises.

Matthew then lists a family tree of Jesus – 41 generations from Abraham, to David, to the Exile – which is boring to hear read but is fascinating to study. Matthew lists this family tree because he wants us to understand that through these mostly forgotten, mostly unimportant people God has been at work to fulfill the promises made to Abraham and David. Matthew wants us to understand that God has taken upon himself the task that God knows we are unable to accomplish by ourselves.

“An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet [to Ahaz]: “Look the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”

Beginning Wednesday evening and for the next twelve days we will celebrate the revelation of Emmanuel. We will rejoice that God does not leave us to try to find the purpose of life on our own, but that God comes of his own initiative to be among us – God with us – Emmanuel – to show us the way of love.