



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## The Sunday after Christmas: In the Fullness of Time Isaiah 7:14-16, Galatians 4:1-7, & St. Matthew 1:18-25 Fr. William Klock

December 31, 2023

St. Luke tells the story of Jesus' birth, from the perspective of Mary. In Luke's Gospel we see an angel come to a young girl to announce that she will bear Israel's Messiah. We get a sense of her excitement. Everyone was, after all, waiting for the Messiah. Most people would have expected him to be born in a palace, so imagine Mary's utter shock to learn that she was to be the one. Yes, her family had descended from David, but they weren't royals by any stretch of the imagination. They were just simple, common people.

St. Matthew, on the other hand, tells the same story from the perspective of Joseph. He was anything but excited to hear the news that Mary was pregnant. It's not hard to imagine the disappointment, the embarrassment, even the shame that he felt. "It's not another man," Mary told him. "I'm pregnant by the Holy Spirit. That's what the angel told me. I don't understand how it can be, but he told me that this child is the Messiah."

Joseph knew where babies come from. This was going to bring shame on him and so, Matthew says, Joseph made plans to quietly separate from Mary—to break off the engagement. Hopefully he could distance himself from the whole fiasco, save some face, move on with life, and maybe find someone more respectable to marry.

But then the angel appeared to Joseph. "Joseph, son of David!" the angel greeted him. Joseph was also a descendant of King David, but so were

a lot of people. This was the first time anyone had ever addressed Joseph as if he were a prince. But the angel's making a point: Joseph is part of the royal family—the family from which the Messiah would come. "Joseph, don't be afraid to follow through with this marriage to Mary. She wasn't lying when she told you she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. She's not crazy. A miracle has really happened. She's going to have a son. And, listen, when he's born, you are to name him 'Jesus'. Why? Because he's the one who will save his people from their sins."

"Joseph, don't be afraid!" This is where Mary's story and Joseph's story intersect. When the angel appeared to Mary he said the same thing to her: "Don't be afraid!" This is what happens every time someone in the Bible is met by an angel or given a message from God: Don't be afraid. God announces that he's about to do something. Maybe what he says he's going to do is itself scary and frightening. Maybe it just seems crazy and impossible. Sometimes it's something that sounds incredibly foolish. This announcement about the baby, conceived by the Holy Spirit and the angel's urging Joseph to go ahead and marry Mary pretty well hits all these points. If any two people needed this exhortation to "Fear not!", Joseph and Mary needed it.

But maybe we need it too as we read the Christmas story. Is it really necessary to emphasise *this* particular part of the Christmas story? I know a lot of people believe it, but they don't want to talk about. It's fine for us, but people out there are going to think we're superstitious or naïve for believing in a virgin birth, because these things don't happen in the real world.

There are people who throw this story out because they associate it with the later legend that grew up about Mary's supposed *perpetual* virginity and the teaching closely associated with it that sex is sinful or dirty. Of course, the

Bible says none of these things. The Gospel-writers give us every reason to believe that *after* Jesus was born, Joseph and Mary went on to have a perfectly normal married life and to have other children. The reason Matthew and Luke tell us this story is because they believed it was true. They had their own reasons to be afraid in telling it. The pagans told stories about half-human men and women fathered by the gods. Ancient mythology is full of those stories. Matthew may have been afraid that people would think he was somehow borrowing from these myths. He surely knew that some people would say that in reporting that Mary was pregnant by the Holy Spirit he was just covering for some indiscretion on Mary's part.

Other people have said that Matthew invented this part of the story so that he could claim Jesus' birth was a fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy—the verse he quotes from Isaiah 7. What's interesting about that is that there is no evidence whatsoever that anyone before Matthew had ever thought of Isaiah's prophecy being fulfilled in the birth of the coming Messiah. No one had ever made the connection. Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled in the days of King Ahaz. Everyone knew that. It was actually Matthew, knowing what Isaiah had said and the history that surrounded that prophecy, who saw there a sort of prefiguring of Jesus.

There are all sorts of ways that people find something to be afraid of in this story—all sorts of reasons people find to reject it. Neither Matthew nor Luke asks us to simply take their word for it. Notice that Matthew, in particular, connects the story of Jesus' birth with a much bigger story—with the story of Israel and of Israel's God. It's almost as if he was anticipating that someone would say, "Virgin birth? Right, Matthew. At your age, how can you not know where babies come from? To the person who says, "The world doesn't work this way" and to the person who might say, "God doesn't

work this way”, Matthew says, “Wanna bet?” And he points us back to look at just how God has worked in history.

This is the point of Matthew’s quote from Isaiah 7 about the virgin conceiving and bearing a son named Immanuel. Matthew ties the birth of Jesus into the larger story of redemption and the larger story of Israel and Israel’s God.

So roll the clock back about 730 years before Jesus was born. That’s when the events of Isaiah 7-9 took place. It was a time in Israel’s history when things were looking very bad. The kingdom had been split for roughly two hundred years: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Ahaz was king of Judah. Ahaz is one of those guys we read about in the book of Kings of which it is said, “He did evil in the sight of the Lord”. It’s worth noting that in pragmatic political terms, Ahaz was a pretty good king. He played the political and foreign policy game in a way that kept Judah safe. But that isn’t how God judges kings. The Lord had told his people to trust in him, not in foreign alliance with pagans, not in horses, not in chariots. But those were the things Ahaz trusted in. Assyria was the great power of the day and it threatened everyone around. Israel and Syria made an alliance with each other for their security, but they still weren’t strong enough. The kings of Israel and Syria put pressure on Ahaz to bring Judah into their alliance.

Ahaz could see that there was no hope in aligning himself with Israel and Syria and, instead, submitted Judah to the sovereignty of the Assyrians. While he was in Assyria he fell under the influence of Assyrian religion. When he returned to Jerusalem, he built an altar like ones he had seen in Assyria and had the temple re-arranged to accommodate it. He introduced Assyrian astrological practises to Judah. He even sacrificed one of his sons to the Assyrian god,

Moloch. In the midst of this, the Prophet Isaiah came to Ahaz.

Isaiah was sent by the Lord to Ahaz the first time as the kings of Syria and Israel were urging Ahaz to ally with them against Assyria. Isaiah didn’t go alone. The Lord told him to take his son, Shear-jashub, which means “A Remnant shall return”. The message the Lord was sending through Isaiah and his son was a familiar one: “Don’t be afraid”. Israel and Syria were threatening to swoop down on Jerusalem with their combined armies, but the Lord said to Ahaz: “It shall not stand”. The Lord was urging the king to trust in him. He also said, through Isaiah, “If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all.”

Ahaz waffled rather than standing firm. The Lord warned him not to ally with Israel and Syria and Ahaz didn’t, but it wasn’t because of the Lord’s warning. Ahaz was afraid of Israel and Assyria and so, rather than trusting the Lord to take care of Judah, he was considering submitting himself and his people to Assyria. And so the Lord sent Isaiah to him again with another warning. This is the passage that Matthew draws on. Isaiah said to the king:

**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.**

What the Lord was saying to Ahaz was, “Look. Trust in me. Don’t trust in horses, don’t trust in chariots, don’t trust in pagan kings and pagan gods. Trust in me and I will take care of you. I am your God and you are my people.” The Lord had Isaiah mention a young woman. The Hebrew word refers to an unmarried girl. Some Bible versions translate this as virgin,

because, being unmarried, the girl was presumably a virgin, but this isn’t a reference to Mary or to an earlier miraculous virgin birth. We don’t know who this girl was, but it seems to be someone known to the king. It might have been one of the women in Isaiah’s circle of disciples or it may have been a princess in the king’s family, but whoever it was, Isaiah tells the king that she’s going to have a child and he is to be named Immanuel. Immanuel means “God is with us”. And the Lord tells the king that by the time this child is eating solid food, by the time he’s old enough to know the difference between good and evil, he, the Lord himself, will put an end to the threat posed by the kings of Israel and Syria. Again: Don’t trust in horses. Don’t trust in chariots. Don’t trust in pagan kings and pagan gods. Trust in the Lord and walk with him.

That wasn’t the end of it. The Lord sent Isaiah a third time to the king. This time a woman referred to as “the prophetess”—probably Isaiah’s wife—had borne a son named Maher-shalal-hash-baz, which means “the spoil speeds, the prey hastens”. The Lord’s message was again for Ahaz to trust in him. Before this child was old enough to say the words “father” and “mother” the Lord would deal with the threat of Israel and Syria. Again, don’t trust in pagan kings and pagan gods, trust in the Lord. “God is with us,” declared Isaiah. “The Lord of hosts, him you shall regard as holy; let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. He will become a sanctuary, a stone one strikes against; for both houses of Israel he will become a rock one stumbles over—a trap and a snare for the inhabitants of Jerusalem.”

Now, is the Lord faithful? Does he do what he promises? Of course. What the Lord promised was exactly what happened. In a short time the king of Assyria crushed Syria and Israel. The northern kingdom was destroyed and the people scattered. The Lord delivered the people of Judah. Ahaz, not surprisingly being the wicked king

he was, made an alliance with Assyria anyway and brought the worship of the Assyrian gods to Israel. His son, Hezekiah, spent most of his reign trying to undo the evil his father had done. Judgement eventually came on Judah too, just as it had on Israel, because the kings of Judah—with a few notable exceptions—failed to trust in the Lord.

Now, back to Matthew. Why does he quote this prophecy about Immanuel that was fulfilled seven hundred years before? Matthew does this because in the story of Isaiah and Ahaz we see how God works. We see God's goodness and his faithfulness to his people and his call to his people to consistently trust in him. We also see God's warning of judgement when his people are unfaithful to him and to the calling he has given. Israel was, yet again, in another awful political spot in Matthew's day. This time it was Rome, not the Assyrians. Just as Ahaz turned to horses and chariots and to forbidden alliances instead of trusting the Lord, the Jews of Matthew's day were trusting in all sorts of things other than the Lord. Jesus spent his entire ministry rebuking these different parties and interest groups. The Zealots were ready to take up arms in a violent revolution. The Essenes went off to hide in the desert and denounced everyone else as unfaithful. The Sadducees sort of took the "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em" tack. All of them needed to be reminded of who they were and to whom they belonged—and in whom they had every reason to trust.

Isaiah made use of three different children. Matthew could have pointed back to any one of them. Just think, we could be singing "O come, O come, Maher-shalal-hash-baz" every Advent. But Isaiah points back specifically to the child named Immanuel, "God with us", because it is a poignant reminder that in Jesus, God truly is with his people. This is what the people of Matthew's day needed to hear as a call back to faith in

the Lord and in the Lord alone. But in an even deeper way, in Jesus, the Lord is with us in a way he never has been before. Whereas in Isaiah's day, the virgin and her child were a *sign* that the Lord was about to act, this time it was the child in whom the Lord was coming to take *the* decisive act in Israel's history. In this baby born of Mary and the Holy Spirit—God became incarnate, God became one of us—to once and for all deliver his people from bondage and to make all things new. And this leads Matthew directly to the angel's instruction to Joseph: You shall call him Jesus, for he shall save his people from his sins.

Jesus, Yeshua and its slightly longer form, Yehoshua (Joshua in English) were common names. It means "Yahweh Delivers", which made it a popular name amongst Jews, but it was made even more popular because the most famous Joshua of all time was the Joshua who took over from Moses and led the Israelites into the promised land. Jesus is not only God with us, but he is the one who will, like Joshua, fulfil what was begun in the Exodus. Joshua led the people into the promised land and Jesus will free his people from their bondage to sin and death and lead them into the life of the age to come. Matthew highlights the important truth for us that Jesus didn't just appear at any old point in history to any old group of people. He came in the fullness of time, as St. Paul writes in our Epistle from Galatians. He came when the time was just right. He came as part of a much bigger story. He came as the fulfilment of a promise to a people who had struggled, themselves, to be faithful. He came to die for the sins of his people, to make them clean, and to fill them with his Spirit—again, to fulfil the story and to make good on God's promises—so that they—and, eventually, so that we, incorporated into their story—can truly love God with hearts and minds made new.

This is what Paul is getting at in our Epistle, Galatians 4:1-7, where he writes:

**When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.**

Brothers and Sisters, this is the story into which we have been baptised. Think about that. What's the formula we use in baptism? It's in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. I don't think we think about this in terms of the story of redemption—at least not as much or as often as we should. We too often think of this formula as specifying which God we're putting our faith in. You know, I'm not baptizing you into the Mormon God or into Zeus or Krishna or the Great Spirit. I'm baptizing you into the Triune God who exists as Father, Son, and Spirit—three in one and one in three. That's part of it, but the more important aspect of it is that this is the God who has acted in history to redeem us and to redeem his Creation.

We are baptised in the name of the Father meaning that we are being incorporated into the family of the God of Israel whose kingdom will come in judgement and restoration. It means we are being baptised into the family that Isaiah called on to trust wholly in our God, for he is good and faithful. When we look around at the sin and pain in the world, we can know that we belong to the God who is making all things new. He is our God and we are his people. As Jesus said and as Paul writes here, through our union with his Son, Jesus, we are the Father's adopted sons and daughters and can approach him as "Abba, Father".

We are baptised into the name of the Son, who in his own baptism committed himself in obedience and in faith to the saving plan of his Father—trusting not in human means and human plans, but in the goodness and faithfulness of the God of Israel. Baptism into the name of the Son, also expresses a commitment to taking up our crosses as we follow him, knowing his promise of rejection, persecution, and even martyrdom for those who follow. We are baptised, as Paul writes, into his death. But we are also baptised into his resurrection. When we are tempted to fear, we need only remember our baptism. God has vindicated his Son and he will vindicate his adopted sons and daughters as well.

And, finally, to be baptised into the name of the Holy Spirit is to be baptised into both a new life and a new mission. Jesus gave the Spirit to his people to fulfil what had been promised long before—to give fallen men and women new hearts capable of trusting, obeying, and loving God. But the Spirit also makes us a prophetic people—a people called to proclaim the good news to the world, the good news that this Jesus, born of Mary, who died and rose again, is the world's true Lord. It is a call to the world around us to stop trusting in horses and chariots, in money, power, and sex, false gods and pretender kings, and to come to Jesus and to be baptised as we have—to submit to the Father's plan, to take up our crosses daily as we follow the Son into the life of the age to come, and to take up this Spirit-filled ministry of proclamation until he comes again. There is no doubt that the task we have been given is a hard one, but Brothers and Sisters, today we are reminded: God is with us.

Let us pray: Almighty God, you have given your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and to be born of a pure virgin: Grant that we, who have been born again and made your

children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit; through our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom with you and the same Spirit be honour and glory, now and for ever. *Amen.*