

## Advent IV December 18, 2022 Year A

Have you ever read or heard something so often that you think you know what it says before you actually look at it? I sure have. Our reading from Isaiah is one of those passages that has adapted to prove the virgin birth of Jesus. It has been taken out of its historical context.

In this passage from Isaiah, God through the prophet, confronts King Ahaz's lack of faith in the God of Israel. Ahaz was terrified that Syria and Ephraim will attack him. He is so afraid that he emptied the treasures of the royal court and the Temple to get help from the Assyrians.

God is frustrated with him and finally offers to give him a sign that God will save Israel. Ahaz refuses to ask for a sign. So God himself gives Ahaz a sign.

The sign is that a young woman will bear a son and celebrate Israel's salvation by naming him Emanuel which means God is with us. The word used to describe the woman in Hebrew is *Almah*, which means a young woman of marriageable age, not necessarily a virgin.

Matthew uses the Hebrew Scriptures to show that they fore-shadow the life of Jesus. But to do that in this case divorces it from history. The birth of Jesus happens 7 centuries after this time. How could it have been a sign for Ahaz? The young woman must have been someone known to him. What Isaiah actually says is that before the child knows how to choose the good and reject evil the two kingdoms of which Ahaz is so afraid will be destroyed.

Can prophecy have more than one interpretation? Can it mean something now and something else in the future? Jesus was born to be the savior of the whole world. We have the Gospel of Luke to give us the details of his conception and birth. The Gospel witness is that Jesus is "God with us" incarnate by the Holy Spirit and Mary.

Paul's Letter to the Romans was written to a church which he did not found. So even before he addresses them, he needs to tell them who he is and why they should listen to him. I remember participating in National Day of Prayer Service. People came from a variety of different churches. We went around the circle and introduced ourselves. We started in the usual way My name is\_\_\_\_, I belong to such and such church etc. One man was from an Eastern Orthodox Church. I'll never forget his introduction. He said "I am a sinner saved by grace". Wow. He was exactly right. He went beyond our superficial identities and got right to the heart of things.

In his introduction to the Romans, Paul does something similar. Paul identifies himself in relationship to Jesus Christ first and foremost. He tells the Roman Church that he is a servant of Jesus Christ. The word he uses for servant is the Greek word for a slave. He is saying that he is completely dependent on God. He says that God set him apart to be an Apostle, to bring the faith to the Gentiles, including the Romans who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. This is the task Jesus Christ has entrusted to him for their sakes.

What is the most important part of your identity? It's so easy to identify with denomination, ethnicity, patriotism, or partisan politics. We need to remember who we really are "sinners saved by grace".

Matthew's Gospel was written for Jewish readers. His main concern is to prove that Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Messiah, by citing the Prophet. Jesus was the fulfillment of prophecy.

In chapter 1 he lists the genealogy of Jesus in 3 groups of 14 generations each. The first group starts with Abraham and ends with King David. The second starts with David until the exile to Babylon. After the exile it is 14 generations until "Joseph, the husband of Mary, the mother of Jesus who is called Christ". It was essential for the authenticity of Jesus as Messiah that he should be a descendant of the Royal House of David.

Most Christmas narratives we are familiar with stress the role of Mary. Joseph is almost an after-thought. Not so in Matthew. The birth of Jesus is also Joseph's story. At the beginning of the story we are told that Mary is betrothed to Joseph but they have not lived together yet. The betrothal period lasted for a year and could only be broke by divorce according to the law.

During this time it is found out that Mary is pregnant. Joseph is described as a righteous and humble man. He was faithful to the Law. But he was also a loving and compassionate man. He decides to divorce Mary quietly so as not to publically shame her.

Then everything changes. An Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. He addressed Joseph as "son of David". He said "do not be afraid". It is what Angels routinely say when approaching humans. The Angel tells Joseph that the child Mary is carrying was conceived through the Holy Spirit so he can take Mary as his wife. This birth will be the work of God. His name will be Jesus. It is the Greek name for Joshua which means Jehovah is salvation. Jesus will be born to save his people from their sins.

At this point Matthew cites the Isaiah passage we just read as proof that Jesus' conception was foretold by the Prophets. He hints at the controversy about the Virgin Birth. Matthew says that Mary and Joseph did not have marital relations until AFTER Jesus was born. This does not negate the miraculous nature of Jesus' birth. God created the Savior by the Holy Spirit and a maiden. Men had nothing to do with it.

Both Joseph and Mary had faith to act on the Heavenly Messages. Pray that we may also act on God's messages to us.

