

December 23, 2018
The 4th Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 7:14-17

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, **the young woman is** with child and **shall bear a son**, and **shall name him Immanuel**. ¹⁵ He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria.”

Matthew 1:18-25

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ happened this way: After His mother Mary was engaged to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child by the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Then Joseph her husband, being a just man and not willing to make her a public example, had in mind to *divorce her privately*.

²⁰ But while he thought on these things, the angel of the Lord appeared

Psalm 23 is perhaps the most famous of the 150 psalms in **THE BOOK OF PSALMS**, or poetic, liturgical songs recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures. It uses one of the primary metaphors for divine, and kingly leadership – shepherding, specifically a good shepherd which would have resonated clearly within a primarily agricultural and pastoral society.

The Lord: YHWH – the divine name in Hebrew, which is difficult to pin to one translation as it can mean “I am who I am” “I was who I will be” or “I will be who I will be.”

The author of the gospel of **MATTHEW** was writing to a mostly Jewish audience after the fall of the Second Temple in 70CE. God’s home on earth had been destroyed. The city of God’s presence had been overwhelmed by Romans. Thousands of Matthew’s readers’ friends and relatives had been brutally killed, hundreds of them by crucifixion on purposefully sadistic Roman crosses. The world and the future did not look good for Jews, or even the small but growing Jesus movement.

In this context, the gospel author reminded his readers of a prophecy about a child born hundreds of years earlier whose birth foretold both deliverance and destruction. The gospel author argues that Jesus’ birth fulfilled that ancient prophecy more than even its original context. Yes, the temple had been destroyed, but Jesus’ incarnation testifies that God is with us!

Just as Joseph’s hope for the future had been crushed by learning that his fiancée was pregnant with someone else’s child, so Matthew’s readers’ hopes for the future had been crushed by the utter devastation of the physical center of God’s kingdom on earth. But Christians have been reminded throughout the ages that Jesus is not just “God with us” (as if that were not enough) but also the living reminder that “God is with us.” So that even though Jesus sits at the right hand of God and does not walk physically with us, his title reminds us that in times of deliverance and in times of suffering both, God is with us.

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divorce her privately: Though Joseph and Mary were betrothed, meaning they had given public and binding vows to each other, they had not yet lived together as man and wife. The only logical conclusion Joseph could reach on his own was that Mary was pregnant by another man – in other words, that she had committed adultery.

Proved adultery was punishable with death by stoning under the Mosaic law. The Gospel of Matthew explains that Joseph was a “righteous man, yet unwilling to expose [Mary] to shame” so he decided to “divorce her quietly.” (Matthew 1:19). This indicates that although Joseph generally respected the law, he did not want to subject Mary to derision, judgment, and possible death. Though we don’t know a lot about the logistics of what it means to divorce someone “quietly” at this time, it presumably means that Joseph intended to dissolve their union with as little fanfare as possible. It’s clear that he had no desire to see her publicly humiliated or put to...

to him in a dream saying,
“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for He who is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.”²¹ She will bear a Son, and you shall call His name **JESUS**, for He will save His people from their sins.”

²² Now all this occurred to fulfill what the Lord had spoken through the prophet, saying, ²³ “*A virgin shall be with child, and will bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,*” which is interpreted, “God with us.”

²⁴ Then Joseph, being awakened from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him, and remained with his wife, ²⁵ and did not know her until she had given birth to her firstborn Son. And he called His name **JESUS**.

QUESTIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF EXAMEN & CONTEMPLATION

- **What shimmers in your attention in this reading?**
- **Second – How was Joseph traversing a valley of the shadow of death?; Mary?; the Israelite people? How was God with them in the darkness of their path?**
- **How do you feel as if you need a shepherd to guide you along the path of your life? How have you experienced God with you in Jesus and his story? How might God be speaking through this well-known story to your current life situation?; our church community?; or what is happening in the world?**

death for what he believed to be her transgression.

JESUS: The name **JESUS** is related to the Hebrew form [Yehoshua`] יְהוֹשֻׁעַ Joshua, first mentioned within the Biblical tradition in Exodus 17:9. It is usually considered to be a compound of two parts: יהו Yeho, a shorthand reference to YHWH, plus a form derived from the Hebrew root y-š-ḥ or י-ש-ע "to liberate, save". This early Biblical Hebrew name יְהוֹשֻׁעַ [Yehoshua`] underwent a shortening into later Biblical יֵשׁוּעַ [Yeshua`] transliterated into the Koine Greek (in which the Septuagint [the Hebrew Scriptures in Greek]) as Ἰησοῦς [Iêsous]. From Greek, it became the Latin IESVS, eventually leading to our English Jesus. The name can mean: YHWH saves; (is) salvation; (is) a saving-cry; (is) a cry-for-saving; (is) a cry-for-help; or (is) my help.

“A virgin ... bear a Son, .. His name Immanuel” : The angel quotes from Isaiah 7:14-17:

In Isaiah 7, the kingdom of Judah was under attack by the northern kingdom of Israel and the allied kingdom of Aram. Isaiah and his eldest son went to the king of Judah and told him to request any sign of his choosing that things would work out for the southern kingdom. King Ahaz refused to choose a sign, so God said that a specific young woman soon would conceive and give birth to a child. Before the child was old enough to know right from wrong, the cities of the kings that threatened Judah would be in ruins.

The prophecy was not unalloyed, however. By the time the child did know the difference between right and wrong, he would be eating milk and honey. These foods, normally associated with the fecund productivity of the land (see Exodus 3:17, Deuteronomy 31:20), in this case alluded to a cessation of normal agriculture because of a siege by the Assyrians (Isaiah 7:17).

The woman in Isaiah’s prophecy would name the child ***Immanuel***, which means “God is with us” in Hebrew. The verb “is” is important. The child referenced in the original prophecy was probably Isaiah’s second son. Rashi, the medieval Jewish commenter, reads continuity between the prophecy of the young woman conceiving in Isaiah 7 and the prophet announcing in Isaiah 8:3 that he made love to his wife, also a prophet, and she conceived a son.

Whoever the child was in Isaiah 7, he was to be a sign, but was certainly not “God with us.” His mother prophesied in naming him “God is with us.” The message that “God is with us” would be true when the kingdoms of Aram and Samaria were laid waste and Judah was saved. The message that “God is with us” would be no less true when the Assyrians laid siege to Judah and her citizens were killed and enslaved. God is with us not just in times of deliverance, but in times of devastation. notes from www.workingpreacher.org