

4th Sunday of Advent
Sermon 12.18.22

Isaiah 7:10-16

Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? 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. 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.

Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him 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: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. (345)

And so, it has happened.

Did it sneak up on you?

Not even a full sentence, not even a full biblical verse.

And not even all the way through Advent. We still have another week to go. Advent is long this year, since Christmas is on a Sunday. It's as long as it can ever be.

But here we are, with him already born. All the preparation. All the hubbub not even complete. And, boy, is there hubbub. Centuries worth. From the highest of the high, to the kitschiest of low. Christmas has become a phenomenon that accommodates every aesthetic and has for centuries. There's a lot now stuck to it, as with so much tape stuck to old gift wrap.

A few years ago, I saw some magazine headline, that Christmas had become everyone's favorite romantic holiday. More, the magazine presented the top ten places to celebrate with your honey all the romance of it. I'm sure one of our Berkshire villages made the list. And I thought, "Huh, I did not see that coming."

Maybe I was still stuck on the Dickensian Christmas. That has such power as to move even the coldest heart to warm charity. But it doesn't have much to say about romantic love. Now it seems Christmas belongs to Hallmark, and you're going to need a cozy inn with a fireplace in every

room to make all your Christmas wishes come true. And it would be better still if your date were a secret prince or princess, maybe of some Nordic country with really nice sweaters.

Christmas is a monster that way. It's got such mass as to have a gravitational field all its own, bringing all cultural output into its sway.

And now it has happened, the point of it all.

Just the barest of mentions, just enough to make the point that it all comes down to a near non-event. Very little "there" there.

Which is very much the point.

I don't preach much on the Old Testament verses that tend to undergird our Advent preparation. They tend to be able to stand on their own. And I figure people's minds are elsewhere mid-December. You're probably not dying to know what was going on with ancient Israel, not when you've got a shopping list a mile long.

But this one's a little mystifying. Other than its mention of a young woman with child, it doesn't really stand on its own in our understanding, and still less speak to our deeper hope. I mean, I suppose it's sort of clear to suggest to us this is a foreshadow of Mary, who won't be naming her son Immanuel but who might as well since Immanuel means God-with-us, which is a central promise regarding Jesus especially according to the Gospel of Matthew, which even ends with Jesus saying this as an otherwise departing promise as the Risen Christ said to the gathered apostles: "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Other than that, there's but this subtler point.

Ahaz was king of Judah at the time of Assyria's imperial moves to take over more and more of the region. Israel and neighboring Syria had already fallen to Assyria, and Judah would likely be next. But Israel and Syria were in talks, were coming to terms, had in mind going in together to throw off the Assyrian yoke. But it would be better for them if they had a third power in their rebellion, a third people with a third king and third army. Judah.

Isaiah, the prophet who counseled Ahaz assured him the Lord would have him wait this all out, maintain what peace is ever possible to maintain when it comes to geopolitics. Don't seek out conflict. Don't pursue rebellion. No matter how hard Israel and Syria press for this. Don't do it.

Ahaz wasn't so sure. "Keep your head down. Just go about your business." This doesn't seem like an adequate response for a kingdom that needed to seem powerful, as all kingdoms tend to need.

Isaiah kept urging this: “Don’t join a rebellion.” Ahaz kept demurring: “Maybe I should join the rebellion? Maybe we could pull it off?” At last, the Lord spoke directly, “Tell me what you need. To convince you not to pick a fight. To convince you that this would doom you to failure, catastrophic failure. Name the sign that will convict you in this less belligerent way.” And it could be an amazing one. It could be an astonishing one, one as deep as the grave or as high as heaven.

Ahaz knew better, of course. “Never put the Lord your God to the test.” So, he demurred on that, too. He said, “I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test.”

Isaiah stepped in here, drew on something more commonplace. A young woman with child will become the measure of time. Before her pregnancy is due, the growing threat will fade to nothing and the one she bears will live in goodness.

There’s an interesting move throughout the story of the Bible. God becomes increasingly small, increasingly subtle and intimate and even quite ordinary. (It’s not for nothing that the longest season of the church year is even named this: ordinary, ordinary time.) And often that’s against the wishes of the people—that God be ordinary, that God be subtle—we who want something grand, something unmistakable.

This being at cross-purposes with our Creator who longs to be known in time, known to His creatures, is one of the undercurrents when it comes to Christianity. There is something insistently small and particular about the grounding story of the faith. That this happened, in Galilee, in Bethlehem, in the court of the guard: all over the gospel witness there are details as if not merely to suggest but to insist, this thing happened, this event or encounter among these people at this time in this place.

And we’re likely quite comfortable with that. We’re likely so familiar with these stories of our faith that we hardly even see that anymore.

But when you compare them to other so-called myths of their time, it’s a striking difference.

I just listened to *The Bacchae*, the Greek play by Euripides in the third century before Christ. In it, Dionysus come to earth, he who is a demi-god, his mother a woman and his father a god. He has come for vengeance because people have failed to accept him as a god.

The similarities between the two stories always pique the interest of those who’d seem to put the gospel in the category of myth.

I think the similarities only make the differences more pronounced. The story of Jesus is not about vengeance. The sacrifice of Jesus isn’t to generate another go at creating another

sacrifice, this whole process that can feel so satisfying, from mounting crisis to cathartic killing to social calm; but to bring that whole dynamic to an end. And the appearance of Jesus amidst history isn't by some grand means—the arrival of something beautiful and godly, sensuous and powerful, but of someone ordinary, and come of the most ordinary—utterly ordinary—means.

A young maiden is pregnant, and then she gives birth.

Which though is also breath-taking in its creative power.

On the one hand, a birth is the most astonishing act of creative power, a new baby a sign of the most out-of-this-world power. On the other hand, a birth and new baby: they happen all the time. Literally, all the time. We are each signs of it being embarrassingly ordinary. You were born. And you were born. And you were born.

The most baffling combination of the out-of-this-world and the commonplace. God-with-us.

But even that's funny about Jesus. I mean, he might have been named Immanuel, which Matthew even suggests he sort of was, since that means God-with-us and Jesus is God incarnate. But in the same breath, Matthew concedes, he was named Jesus, which Joseph did name him because he heard in a dream that he should.

And I sometimes wonder if this would have been something of a punchline in the story's original hearing. I mean, Jesus, which was in its original rendering *Ye-ho-shua* or *Yeshua*, was a common name, incredibly, even embarrassingly common—which you'll sense in the Spanish-speaking world, where boys and men named Jesus are also quite common. But English-speakers have sort of missed the point. In cordoning off the name "Jesus" for ordinary use, we've given it an air of something rarefied and singular—when it's one possibility, at least, that God was trying to join us as one of us in coming to us as he did in this baby, this boy, this man. To be not so rarefied. To be very, very commonplace.

Did you hear that? Did you hear what I just said? What a wild thing to suggest! God-with-us. God incarnate. The holy and transcendent God born of a young woman as a baby, to grow and live and teach and heal, and then suffer and die, and then to rise though not as a god-man but as one crucified though come now in peace.

But that's what Christmas has us suggest, has us moreover confess. And we sneak it into our Christmas carols and into many of our ornaments. And we make this great party of it all—because that's what we do.

Meanwhile, in all our preparation and all our celebration, we might just miss it, this but one half of a mere Bible verse: "...she had borne a son; and named him Jesus..."

Thanks be to God.