

**Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 18, 2016**  
**Christ Episcopal Church, La Crosse, Wisconsin**  
**The Rev. Canon Patrick P. Augustine, D.Min., DD., Rector**  
**Isaiah 7: 10—16, Matthew 1:18-25**

### **Trusting God**

We have finally arrived at the fourth Sunday of Advent. We are almost ready to celebrate Christmas, but not yet. We all understand that Christmas is the largest and single most celebrated event around the world. American culture and media both load Christmas with expectations of family harmony and good cheer. I like this image even as it is a false one. These images and expectations allow Hallmark and the shopping mall catalog to define the “perfect Christmas.” Today’s text reminds us that the preparations for the first Christmas were anything but conventional and were far from “proper.”<sup>[1]</sup> Joseph, whom the text calls a righteous man, discovers that his soon-to-be wife is pregnant. Joseph is horrified to learn this fact about the pregnancy of Mary. On the other hand Mary, a young Virgin, is full of wonderment as she had never known a man. She questions the proclamation of the angel: “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” (Luke 1: 34). After hearing the reading from the Holy Gospel according to Matthew one may ask a question: “Could two people be more different?”

Mary’s miraculous conception is announced as a fact without explanation: “She was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit” (v. 18). Since Joseph does not know the cause of her pregnancy, he fears she has been unfaithful. Betrothal was equivalent to marriage, infidelity counted as adultery. He is horrified as according to the Law of Moses he would have to divorce her and Mary’s punishment could be death (Deut. 22:13-27). Before Joseph could take any action, he was visited by an angel in his sleep and told to take Mary as his wife. “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” (vv.20-21). Joseph is a godly man and here he is caught up in a cosmic drama beyond anything he could imagine or for human understanding to believe. He is asked not only to believe several impossible things before breakfast—but to act on this revelation in faith.

We learn here a strange fact that “We may not demand of sovereign Creator that God explain to us his creatures...God had good and sufficient reasons for His actions; we trust His sovereign wisdom and love.”<sup>[2]</sup> For God Himself said through Isaiah:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,  
declares the Lord. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher  
than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts’” (Isaiah 55: 8-9).

In other words, the ways and thoughts of God are incomprehensible to human beings.

Joseph, a bewildered but righteous man, is addressed by the angel as “son of David,” reinforcing the messianic ancestry of Jesus. He was assured that this child would be a son, whom Joseph was to name *Jesus*—or Joshua, which means “God saves.” The name (*Iesous*) Jesus was a popular name for boys at the time of Jesus’ birth. In Hebrew *Yehoshua* is the same as “Joshua”, who brought Israelites into the Promised Land after the death of Moses. And the angel said this child would “save his people from their sins” (v.21) in God’s plan for the world. Matthew plays on words in verse 21. The Hebrew and Aramaic forms of this name reminded Jews of the Hebrew word for salvation. Matthew twice identified Jesus as “Messiah” (vv. 1, 18). It was popularly believed that the Messiah would bring salvation to Israel by defeating its Gentile foes. In order to support this, Matthew provides a Scripture text from Isaiah 7:14 as further proof that the birth of this child would fulfill the ancient prophecies. This child would be called *Emmanuel*, “God is with us,” as further indication that Jesus is the Messiah of God.

The other name mentioned in the Old Testament reading of Isaiah 7:14: “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.” In the Hebrew Scriptures, Israel is often referred to as a young woman and sometimes specifically as a virgin. In Amos 5:2: “Fallen, no more to rise, is the virgin Israel.” We can speculate that Isaiah has a messianic prophecy and proposed that Virgin Israel would give birth to the Messiah. Mary in the birth narratives represents virgin Israel, who cannot bring forth the Messiah without God’s direct intervention.

Matthew’s eye is not only on the single passage of Isaiah 7.14, but on the whole drama of Isaiah’s prophetic promises such as:

“For a child has been born for us: a son given to us;  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty-God, Prince-of-Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The Spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.... The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them....” (Isaiah 11:1-9).

Now Jerusalem can shout for triumph, “for the Holy One of Israel is among you” (Isaiah 12:6).

Only within the larger stories, of Isaiah and of Jesus himself, can we see why Emmanuel mattered to Mathew. In the Gospels two names Jesus and Emmanuel clearly define that our God is an awesome God who does not intervene from a distance, but is always active, sometimes in most unexpected ways. This is the God, and this is the Jesus, who comes to us still today when human possibilities have run out, offering new and startling ways forward, in fulfillment of his promises, by his powerful love and grace. Here, at last, in the person of Jesus, God is with us. “Look,” says the risen Jesus on the mountain, “I am with you; yes, to the end of time” (Matthew

28.20). I invite you to come home where Emmanuel our God with us dwells, and worship and adore him who joins us on Christmas Eve.

The angel said that Christmas would bring “*great joy...for all the people.*”

This is the day of the Lord’s victory;  
Let us be happy, let us celebrate! (Psalm 118:24)

Invite your family and your friends and come here to celebrate the birthday party for Jesus this Christmas and receive this good news:

God loves you!

God is with you!

God is for you!

Please come and celebrate and be the “eyewitness of his majesty” (2Peter 1:16).

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[1] David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors, *Feasting on the Word*, WJK, 2010, Pp. 92-97.

[2] Clarkson, *Destined for Glory*, p.19.