

For most of my life, Christmas has been pretty stressful. I'm a divorce kid, which means since I was 13, I've had to navigate two Christmases. Any of you who have divorce as part of your story know that special pain divorce mixes into a celebration. Thanksgiving, Christmas, even birthdays all have a layer of complication added, a broken relationship that has to be navigated.

My experience of divorce Christmas is a microcosm of the tension at the heart of the Christmas story. Jesus' birth is announced by angels declaring "Peace on Earth", but it's declared to shepherds in fields. In the nearby capitol, a corrupt king rules not as God intended, but as the puppet of an evil empire. And Jesus was born into poverty, among animals, to an unwed mother who claimed to be a virgin.

Nothing about the first Christmas was exceptionally peaceful, which makes the angels' declaration all the more strange. And really, not much has changed for us today. Christmas is rarely peaceful for us. As much as we enjoy the holiday, it's stressful on any number of levels.

We love Christmas because it's a season of hope, joy and peace. We *crave* Christmas because we desperately need hope, joy and peace. And it seems like the more profoundly we need them, the more difficult it is to believe in them.

This is the last Sunday of Advent, the season of the Church that prepares us to celebrate Christmas. Advent is a time when we reflect on *why* Jesus came, and what it means that he'll come again. We do that by listening to Israel's story, to the long centuries they waited for the birth of God's promised Messiah.

Our series this Advent is called Pure Imagination. We've been listening to the prophet Isaiah, who offers amazing visions of God's coming. He talks about the nations turning their swords into plowshears, about wolves and lambs living in peace together, about deserts blooming.

These visions strike us as pure fiction - pie in the sky that sound nice but are totally impossible. But we recognize today what Isaiah could not: the visions he gave us are the world God is even now bringing into being. This work of new creation began with Jesus' birth, and is continuing.

For those of us who are part of God's new creation enterprise, we need to keep Isaiah's visions before us. They purify our imaginations. They remind us of the world God is creating, so that we can see now how we are to join God in bringing about this new world.

[Jane/Mary the Virgin] So today, I want to tackle Isaiah's most far-fetched vision yet - the prophecy of the Virgin Birth. The idea that Mary, Jesus' mother, was a virgin when she became pregnant with Jesus is one of the parts of Christianity that is frankly difficult to believe. Plenty of atheists and agnostics point to the Virgin Birth as an example of the primitive superstition in which Christianity is hopelessly mired. And plenty more people who love Jesus and the idea of faith still can't quite bring themselves to buy it. It creates this strange dissonance in Christmas worship because you feel like you have to sort of suspend disbelief, or that Christmas is sort of childish with all these impossible claims it makes.

But the Apostles' Creed, one of the oldest affirmations of what we believe, states,

"I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary."

Why does it matter that Jesus was born of a virgin? Can it be anything more than primitive superstition? And how is it *good news* for us today, in our world that still desperately needs peace?

[Scripture Slide] For that, turn with me to Isaiah 7. One of the most surprising things we'll see today is that Isaiah's prophecy wasn't about a virgin having a baby. The Hebrew word Isaiah uses refers to young women of marriageable age. There's no reason to assume in Isaiah's prophecy the pregnant young woman is a virgin - in fact, if Isaiah had wanted to highlight that she was a virgin, he would've used a different Hebrew word.

In Isaiah's prophecy, the emphasis isn't on the young woman but the child. So before we read, let's get some context. Isaiah is a prophet in the 8th century BC. At this point in history, God's people are divided into two nations - Israel to the North and Judah to the South. The major world power at this time is the Assyrian Empire, and all the small kingdoms around Israel and Judah are afraid of being conquered by Assyria's aggressive expansion policy.

This particular prophecy was delivered to King Ahaz of Judah, the Southern kingdom. In 734, the kings of Israel and Aram tried to conquer Jerusalem and replace Ahaz with a puppet king who would back their alliance against Assyria. Ahaz is terrified that he is going to be conquered and killed.

So listen to what God says to Ahaz through the prophet Isaiah:

[Here, use my text - I have altered bits of the translation to more accurately reflect the Hebrew!]

Later, the Lord sent this message to King Ahaz: "Ask the Lord your God for a sign of confirmation, Ahaz. Make it as difficult as you want—as high as heaven or as deep as the place of the dead."

But the king refused. "No," he said, "I will not test the Lord like that."

Then Isaiah said, "Listen well, you royal family of David! Isn't it enough to exhaust human patience? Must you exhaust the patience of my God as well? All right then, the Lord himself will give you the sign. Look! The young woman is with child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means 'God is with us'). By the time this child is old enough to choose what is right and reject what is wrong, he will be eating yogurt and honey. For before the child is that old, the lands of the two kings you fear so much will both be deserted. -- Isaiah 7:10-16

Initially, Ahaz refuses a sign, even though God tells him it could be literally anything. Already, we can discern in Ahaz's refusal a reluctance to trust God. He claims he doesn't want to test God, but really here Ahaz is being tested.

Isaiah declares that God will give Ahaz a sign in any case, and the feel is that he points to a young woman in the room with them. She is already pregnant, and will give birth to a boy (who's name will be "God is with us".)

And here's the important part of the prophecy: by the time he's weaned, he'll be eating yogurt and honey.

This is God's sign to Ahaz: he's got maybe 3 or 4 years before the two kings who threaten him will be defeated. Though they threaten the city now, their terror won't last. This baby, who's not even quite born yet, will not know the hunger of siege. He won't know the terror of war. By the time he's old enough to know anything, Judah will have peace and her enemies will be defeated.

[**The virgin is hold a sign that says, "God is With You"**] What is God doing here? It's tempting to think Ahaz just needs some encouragement. He's afraid, so God gives him a sign that says, "Hang in there, buddy! Things are going to work out!" But that's not what prophecy does.

If prophecy is just about telling the future, if the future is fixed and Ahaz just needs to know things are going to be okay, then prophecy encourages passivity. It's like looking into a crystal ball, seeing what's going to happen, and letting out a big sigh, sitting back and relaxing.

Everything's going to work out okay, so we can relax.

That's not what biblical prophecy is, and that's not what God is doing in this passage.

No, the sign God gives Ahaz points not to the inevitability of the future, but to God's decisive work. Ahaz is a descendant of David, God's beloved King, whom God promised would always have a son on the throne of Israel. By working to protect and preserve Ahaz on the throne, God is holding up God's end of the covenant.

By offering Ahaz this sign, God is inviting Ahaz to hold up his end of the covenant as well. God isn't saying, "Things will work out because I know the future." God is saying, "You're going to be okay because you are my people and I am with you. I am working with you and for you. I will not let you fall."

The sign, this child born among them, is an invitation to join in what God is doing.

So, let's go to the New Testament. In Matthew's story of Jesus' birth, he says,

All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet: "Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means 'God is with us.' " -- Matthew 1:22-23

What does he mean when he tells us that Jesus' birth happens "to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet"?

Usually we take this to mean Isaiah was a fortune teller, who promised that one day, Jesus would be born. But as we've just seen, that's not at all what Isaiah was doing. He was talking about a woman who gave birth during Ahaz' rule. In fact, if Isaiah had only been prophesying about someone who wasn't going to be born for 700 years, it wouldn't have been an effective sign for Ahaz.

No, when Matthew says Jesus fulfills Isaiah's prophecy he means something very different. In fact, this idea of fulfillment is one we see over and over in Matthew. Matthew's purpose is not to demonstrate that Jesus checked off a bunch of boxes to prove he is God. For the early Christians, Jesus' resurrection proved his divinity far more fully than a checklist ever could.

Matthew wants to illustrate how Jesus is Israel's Messiah, that he is the fulfillment of the whole story of Israel wrapped up into one person. Just as Isaiah did for Ahaz, Matthew wants to demonstrate to us that Jesus is God with us. His birth is a sign for us. Not a sign that everything is going to be okay, so just sit back and relax

Jesus' birth is a sign that peace is coming into the world despite the very best efforts of all the evil kings and crooked empires and powers of darkness arrayed against it. Because God is with us, God is on the move, and God is bringing peace into the world, through a manger, and through a cross and through an empty tomb.

But why the change to virgin? Well, a couple of reasons. First, Matthew uses the Greek translation of Isaiah, which uses a word that translates to "virgin". But with as well as Matthew demonstrates his knowledge of the Hebrew it's unlikely he just made a mistake here (as some of our atheist friends suggest). Rather, it's worth noting that Matthew is writing in Greek, to an audience as Greek as they are Jewish.

Caesar Augustus, the great Emperor of Rome, was said to have been born of a virgin. And the Greek gods were constantly coming to Earth, assuming human form and causing all sorts of problems for humanity.

Matthew is sending a clear message: Jesus has come not only for Jews, but for the whole world. Unlike Caesar, he comes not to conquer, but to free. And unlike the Greek gods, his arrival is good news. He comes to bring peace, not mischief. He comes not for his own gain, but for ours.

In other words, Jesus' virgin birth is a sign to the whole world that the creator God has entered into the creation. As was Immanuel's birth to Ahaz, so Jesus' birth points for us to God's work in the world. His birth says, "Wake up! Pay attention! God is *with* you. God has not forgotten the promises made long ago. God is working to bring justice, to make peace, to give life.

I understand why it can be difficult to embrace the idea of Jesus' virgin birth. We don't live in a world that likes to consider the possibility of miracles. Like Ahaz, we're more comfortable with a God who doesn't intervene, a God who watches us from afar. But friends, this is not who the God of the Scriptures is.

God is not distant. God is here. God is near us. God is with us, inviting us in.

Christmas is one of those times of year when the veil between Heaven and Earth is thinner, when you can *feel* God nearer. We have those moments, every now and again in our lives. Moments that remind us God is with us.

There will be moments in the coming days when the veil is thin, when you can feel Heaven pressing into your reality, insisting that peace is here. There will be other moments when the veil feels like a wall, when peace seems like a pipedream.

Like Ahaz, you will be tempted to shrink back from your holy calling. You will be tempted to hide behind your walls. But hear the prophet's words: The child is Immanuel. God with you. Peace is coming, and Christmas is your sign, your invitation to join in.

I know how mystical that sounds. The Virgin Birth is like that too - for many of us it still strains credulity. But friends, the message of Christmas is that God is with us. The creator is among the creation. There is nothing God cannot do - even raising the dead and giving children to virgins.

This is a sign for you. The God of the universe is with you. Here, working to bring peace. You are invited to join in. God is calling you to get with the program. Not to despair, and not to sit back passively, but to join God in bringing about the angelic proclamation. God is with us. Let there be peace on earth, and goodwill to all humanity, with whom God is pleased!

[Communion Slide] This table embodies that invitation.

1. When in the last week have you worked to make peace?
2. When in the last week have you been passive or even worked against peace?
3. When in the next week will you be tempted to be passive or work against peace?
4. How can you choose to join God in peacemaking this week?