

First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)
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December 19, 2021

Fourth Week of Advent
The Virgin's Son, the Lord Messiah

Isaiah 7:14 (NIV)

14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

Luke 1:26-38 (NIV)

26 In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30 But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. 31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

34 "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

35 The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. 36 Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. 37 For no word from God will ever fail."

38 "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

Matthew 1:18-25 (NIV)

18 This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. 19 Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

20 But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. 25 But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

[Slide 1] Opening

Good morning church! During Advent this year, we’re giving special attention to one of the often overlooked aspects of the Christmas story—the role of the prophecies concerning the coming of Israel’s Messiah. Today, we’re looking at one of the most important of those prophecies, one that has been wrapped in controversy, almost since the beginning of the church’s history. We heard it just moments ago from Isaiah 7:14: “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”

[Slide 2] The historical context of the 8th century BC

We looked at this verse in connection with some other passages in Isaiah a few weeks ago at the beginning of Advent. Let me refresh your memory a bit.

In the year 735 BC, the king of Israel and the king of Syria had allied in order to attack the small kingdom of Judah. Isaiah the prophet spoke to Ahaz, the king of Judah, of a sign that was coming—a young woman was going to bear a son and name him Immanuel, “*God with us.*” The birth of this boy was a sign that God had promised to save his people from these two kings. But instead of believing God’s prophetic word, Ahaz chose to take matters into his own hands. He enlisted the aid of Assyria, who gladly welcomed his acknowledgment of their supremacy and exacted tribute from him as the price of their protection—a situation that would become catastrophic in the years to come, as the prophet warned Ahaz.

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One of the things that is significant about this word to Ahaz is that it was not just given to Ahaz. The pronoun “you” in the first part of the sentence (“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign:”) is plural, meaning that the sign that is to be given is not given just to the king, but to a wider group. That

group could be the entire nation of Judah; at the very least it refers to the house of David—all of those who are part of the Davidic royal line, the family God promised would remain the rulers over Israel. In the original historical setting, therefore, Isaiah is saying to all of those who are themselves part of the fulfillment of God’s promise to David, a son will be born, as a sign that God will save his people and preserve this nation and the Davidic royal line.

That means that the prophetic promise extends beyond Ahaz and his own time. Yes, God was going to deliver him and the nation from the immediate threat coming from the attacks of his neighboring enemies. But God was looking beyond the immediate future to a greater fulfillment later—when a Son would be born who would deliver God’s people from a greater threat: he would save them from the weight of the guilt of their sin.

[Slide 4] *The controversy over this prophecy*

So what’s the controversy concerning this prophecy and the Christian claim that it was fulfilled in the birth of Jesus the Messiah?

Let’s start with the word “virgin” in Isaiah 7:14. In the original text of Isaiah 7:14, the Hebrew word that is translated “virgin” in most English translations is *’almah*. In Hebrew the word is a bit ambiguous; it refers to a young, unmarried woman who is past puberty and therefore of marriageable age. Youthfulness appears to be the primary idea associated with the word. Virginity is assumed by the use of this word rather than stated: in the Hebrew culture of that time, virginity was axiomatic for unmarried women. There is another Hebrew word, *bethulah*, which does specify a virginal woman, but Isaiah does not use this term. Instead, he chooses the more ambiguous word. We might translate it in English, therefore, as “girl,” or “maiden,” or “young woman.”

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Those who deny that this verse was prophetic of Jesus’ birth, therefore, insist that Isaiah, in the 8th century BC, was simply saying that a woman who was then of marriageable age would soon be married, then conceive and bear a son. He is not insisting that this woman was then a virgin, though it would be expected that she was. Furthermore, they contend that Isaiah is not predicting that this young woman will have a miraculous conception, only that she is currently unmarried and presumably a virgin. He expects that she will marry and give birth normally. But God will use this birth as a sign for the people of his day. Consequently, the critics argue, this verse does not support the Christian claim that the Old Testament predicted a miraculous conception and birth by a virgin.

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Is that true? Is that how we should read Isaiah 7:14?

Honestly, the answer is: “*Mmm, sort of, but not quite.*” The critics are correct that Isaiah, in the 8th century BC, was looking primarily at a situation that was happening right then. In the following verses of chapter seven, Isaiah indicated that the initial fulfillment of his words would happen within a few years. And so it did. The young woman of whom he spoke gave birth to the son whom he had predicted. Before the boy was four years old, the kings who were threatening Judah had been defeated. The immediate threat to the Davidic line was gone.

But there are some strong reasons for saying that this view is inadequate. Some of those reasons are located in the verse itself; others come from elsewhere and take a little more work to uncover.

[Slide 7] *Support for the traditional view*

So, let's take the easier part first. I told you that the Hebrew word '*almah*' doesn't clearly specify a woman who is a virgin. It does, however, often presume virginity, and never elsewhere in the Bible does it refer to a married woman. So, although the term was ambiguous, it was a perfectly acceptable choice to refer to a woman who was a virgin.

In fact, when the book of Isaiah was translated into Greek some five centuries later, the translators used the Greek word *parthenos*, which does specifically and unambiguously refer to a virgin. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, they translated '*almah*' by a Greek word that was also a generic term, *neanis*, which means “young woman.” But in this verse, they chose to use the more specific term *parthenos*. The translators, whose understanding of Isaiah 7:14 would have been based upon the shared traditional understanding within the Hebrew community, assumed that Isaiah was referring to a woman who was a virgin, and concluded that this fact was significant. Hence, the use of *parthenos*.

By the second century BC, therefore, the Jewish communities around the Mediterranean who spoke Greek instead of Aramaic, and who were accustomed to reading the Scriptures in Greek instead of in Hebrew, would have been familiar with this verse that spoke of a virgin who would conceive and bear a son, whose birth would signal God's promise to deliver his people, because he was “Immanuel,” God with us. They would not necessarily have thought that Isaiah's words signaled a miraculous conception. But they would have understood that the verse was referring to a virgin.

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We should not ignore the fact that this prophecy, which was originally delivered orally to Ahaz and the members of his court, was recorded and became a

part of sacred Scripture. That meant that it was regarded as God's word to his people, which had come from a recognized prophet of God and through which God continued to speak to his people. Even though its original setting in the 8th century BC referred to an event that had already taken place, God could still use his word to speak to his people throughout history. If God intended more by the use of that original word, he could make that known to his people. (Recall what I said about the plural "you" in the original prophecy: the sign was meant for more than just king Ahaz. And as I mentioned in a previous message, there are other indications in chapters 7-11 that signal that Isaiah's words held greater significance and pointed to a later, greater Son to come.)

[Slide 9] *Matthew's account*

So, when Matthew writes about the birth of Jesus, he clearly indicates that it happened in order to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah—and he quotes Isaiah 7:14 *from the Greek translation of Isaiah*. He appeals to the text from Isaiah to show that the Scriptures predicted the birth of Jesus, and does so, knowing that the Hebrew text used a word that was ambiguous, but the Greek translation used a word that was not. He's writing in Greek, so it makes sense to use the Greek translation of the verse—but Matthew sometimes uses his own translation of the Hebrew text, so he's not just copying the existing translations all of the time. Matthew wants his readers to understand that he sees the birth of Jesus as a miraculous fulfillment of a prophecy that was given 750 years previously, a prophecy that specified a birth to a virgin.

But the question is, why should he think that? Why would he appeal to a passage which he knew the Jewish community would not understand as a prediction of a miraculous birth?

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Like the rest of the early disciples of Jesus, Matthew found in the Old Testament Scriptures confirmations about the Messiah and the church which had usually not been recognized prior to that time. Those confirmations depended entirely on the new understanding they received from Jesus.

For instance, prior to the coming of Jesus, the commonly assumed picture of the Messiah among the Jewish community was one of two things. Either he was a heavenly being come down from above to rescue Israel from her enemies or he was a godly Jewish man raised up by God to be a deliverer for his people. If he was a heavenly being, then birth was not an issue, and Isaiah 7:14 didn't refer to him at all. If he was a godly Jewish man, then the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 wasn't likely predictive of him—or if it was, it didn't signal much of anything at all. After

all, Isaiah prophesied that a boy would be born in the future. If the Messiah is just another godly human man, of course he's going to be born at some point in the future. And his birth would be normal, his mother would have been a virgin prior to her marriage, and he would be the firstborn son. That's about all you could wring from Isaiah 7:14 on either of those two assumptions.

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But what if the common understanding of Isaiah's prophecy was wrong? Or inadequate? What if they had missed the significance of the word *'almah*? And the clue that came through the Greek translation, *parthenos*? And more to the point, what if there was something that clearly showed that the common understanding of Isaiah's prophecy was wrong? What if there was other information that forced us to reconsider what Isaiah had said?

That is precisely where we land when we read Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus. Isaiah's prophecy, in its context, with the other clues about a greater son to come, points to a future fulfillment. But it's still pretty obscure. Unless Matthew had other information about the birth of the Messiah, he would have had no reason to suspect that Isaiah's prophecy predicted anything other than a normal birth of a boy who would become the hope-for deliverer. But because Matthew *does* have more information, suddenly the wording of Isaiah 7:14—particularly in the Greek versions—is exceedingly important. For the *parthenos*, the virgin has conceived and given birth to a Son who is God with us.

[Slide 12] *Luke's confirming witness*

And Matthew is not alone. We also read this morning the familiar account of the angel coming to Mary from Luke's gospel. Luke does not appeal to Isaiah's prophecy directly. But he nevertheless agrees with Matthew on this crucial point which each of them emphatically asserts—that Mary was a virgin, a *parthenos*, that her conception of her son was the result of a miracle prior to her marriage and apart from any kind of sexual relations.

Now, it's important to note something else at this point. Matthew and Luke wrote their gospels independently. There are a number of places where it is apparent that both of them used a common source—there are sections of the two gospels that read almost verbatim in Greek. But the birth stories are quite different: Matthew focuses on the person of Joseph while Luke focuses on Mary. In other words, they did not ignorantly repeat an unsupported legend about Mary. Each reported different aspects of the birth of Jesus. So, we have two independent witnesses who say that the earliest church knew that Jesus' birth was the result of a miraculous, virginal conception.

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We can go even further—consider what these two very different accounts agree on:

(1) Each clearly specifies that Mary was betrothed to Joseph; that is, they were not yet married.

(2) Luke specifically refers three times to Mary as a virgin (*parthenos*); Matthew uses the same word once, and insists that the marriage of Joseph and Mary was not consummated prior to the birth of Jesus.

(3) Matthew specifically states that Mary's pregnancy was not due to sexual union with a man, but came about by divine action. Luke indicates the same thing, though he is more subtle in his presentation.

When Mary asks the angel how it is that she will bear a son, her question only makes sense if she understands that the angel's message to her means that this is going to happen right away, not as the result of her marriage to Joseph (which is still some time off). If Mary thought that the angel's message meant, "*After you marry Joseph, you will conceive a son who will grow up to be the Davidic king*", her response to the angel would not be "*How can this be? I'm still a virgin*," because after her marriage, she would expect to no longer be a virgin. Instead, her response would have been, "*How can this be? We're really poor and Joseph is just a common builder.*" Mary's question only makes sense if the angel is speaking of a supernatural conception before she and Joseph have consummated their coming marriage (or that the angel is indicating she should commit fornication prior to their wedding—which is shocking and confusing to her).

(4) Both agree that the divine messenger directed that the child be named Jesus. For Joseph, this came in a dream; for Mary, it was a personal appearance.

(5) Both agree that the child's ultimate destiny involves saving God's people. For Matthew, this is expressed in terms of saving them from their sins; for Luke, it is included in the notion of ruling on the throne of David, to deliver the people from their oppressors.

(6) Finally, it is significant that each of these two gospel authors considered the birth of Jesus to be an essential part of the message to the world about who he was. Each of them considered that his birth was the fulfillment of earlier prophecies about him as the Messiah. And each of them regarded it supremely important that the miraculous nature of his birth be understood.

So, we have two independent witnesses to the miraculous conception of Jesus, both of which bear the marks of being based on eyewitness accounts. Where

would they have gotten their information? The obvious answer is from Mary herself, who was well-known to the apostles.

[Slide 14] *Opposition to the Virgin Birth*

Opponents of the Christian faith have taken aim at the doctrine of the virgin birth, almost from the start of the church's history. In response to the church's preaching about Jesus as the Son of God, miraculously conceived by Mary through the power of the Holy Spirit, the unbelieving Jewish communities in the late first century began spreading ugly rumors—that Mary had been raped or had an illicit affair with a Roman soldier named "*Panthera*," a punning twist on the Greek word for virgin, *parthenos*. Pagan philosophers, such as Celsus in the second century, scoffed at the church's insistence that Jesus' birth was miraculous. Several early off-shoots from the church in the second through fourth centuries rejected either or both the deity of Christ and his birth from a virgin. One of them was a Jewish branch known as Ebionites. Another was a group that followed Paul of Samosata, one of the earliest proponents of the view known as adoptionism, the idea that Jesus was simply a man who was promoted to being God for his holiness.

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Currently, there is a lengthy list of scholars and pundits who offer their explanations for how the church came to believe in the virgin birth, something which they assert simply didn't happen. Most of them assume that Joseph, or someone else, an unknown rapist, perhaps, was the father of Jesus. But all of them who do so fall into a very basic trap—and deny the faith they claim to represent (or the faith that they once held, or that they know that others hold). All of them, quite intentionally, want to reshape Christian faith into something quite different from what it has been, and to remove it from its biblical foundation and base it on a foundation of their own making.

[Slide 16] *Why it matters*

For denial of the virgin birth is a denial of the most basic of Christian beliefs—the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus, who was fully and perfectly human, while simultaneously fully and perfectly divine. Without this foundational truth at the core of what we believe, we do not have a genuinely Christian faith. You might have a nice faith, a comfortable faith, maybe even an elegant faith, a set of religious ideas that allows you to fit in well with the contemporary world. But you do not have a Christian faith. Gresham Machen put it well a century ago—denial of the virgin birth results in a completely different religion than historic Christianity. The fact that such a religion exists today, side by side with

biblical Christianity, and is increasingly popular, is simply another reminder of our need to be true to the Scriptures and to God as they reveal him to us.

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The theological significance of the doctrine of the virgin birth cannot be overstated. (It can be misunderstood—and we don't have time today to get into that—but it cannot be overstated.) This is not one of those doctrinal grey areas where we agree to disagree while we continue to debate the details of our understanding of what constitutes Christian faith. For without the miraculous conception of Jesus in the womb of the virgin, Mary, we are left with a merely human Jesus, who is not the incarnation of the Father, but simply a nice Jewish boy who wanted us to love one another and be nice to people.

The miracle of the virgin birth gives us a necessary plank in the foundation for Christian faith. It preserves the deity of Christ and thus the mystery of the Trinity, while also preserving the miracle and mystery of the Incarnation, God becoming human in order to save us. It preserves the gospel: Jesus, truly and fully man, and therefore able to represent us before the Father; truly and fully God, and therefore able to offer a sinless sacrifice on our behalf. Without the virgin birth, the gospel unravels, Christian theology unravels, and we are left trying to stitch a patchwork of incoherent religious ideas into a meaningful tapestry, and the effort fails miserably.

[Slide 18] *A more immediate concern*

But I have a more immediate concern today as we think about the stories from Luke and Matthew, and the prophecy from Isaiah. The theology is crucial and I will not tire from declaring its importance or explaining why it matters. Today, though, I am thinking about another concern, one that is directly related to how we approach Christmas in our world, in our lives, with our families.

Some of you have figured out that I have a problem with sentimentalism when it comes to Christmas. You've heard me poke fun at Hallmark movies, for instance. (Low-hanging fruit, if you ask me.) But I want you to understand something, something really important.

I'm not opposed to sentiment. I don't think that being sentimental is bad or wrong or sinful. In fact, the older I get, the more I've realized how easily I cry when I see certain scenes in movies or when I hear certain songs. There's a real softie inside of this old guy.

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But my concern about sentimentality—and particularly with regard to Christmas and to the baby in the manger—is this: Christmas is inherently

wonderful. And we have an abundance of traditions—shared with many or unique to our family—that reinforce the wonderfulness of Christmas and encourage us to plunge into the season at full tilt, to embrace it all. And I want to do the same—to encourage you to embrace it all, to enjoy Christmas in every way and in every moment that you can. Deck your halls and fill your stockings, hug your kids and grandkids. Make the most of Christmas—whatever that looks like at your home.

But it is far too easy to become enamored with the trappings of Christmas; to fall in love with decorating; to be overjoyed with cookies and candy; to be thrilled with wonderful music; to seek for solace and comfort in the hugs of family who come to visit; to fill your mind with dreams of holding a baby again (or maybe of holding a baby of your own); to fill your heart with all of the warmth and familiarity and good feelings of Christmas traditions; *and miss the whole point of it all while you're busy celebrating Christmas to the max.*

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So please, in all of your celebrating, be intentional about holding onto the truth of Christmas, not just the word. Make time to consciously, purposefully, and repeatedly remind yourself and anyone you meet—that the only reason Christmas matters at all is because a virgin, a young woman still in her teens and unaware of all that was about to burst upon this world, gave birth to a son, the Son of God. He was the Lord Messiah, the promised one of whom the prophets spoke. He was the one who would set us free from our sins, who would rule forever on the throne of David, who would bring in the kingdom of God; the only perfect God-man, in whom we see both the fullness of God and the perfection of humanity; who for us and for our sins came down from heaven and made a way for us to know God.

That's what Christmas means. That's why we celebrate. The decoration and all of the traditions and music and food and stuff that comes along with it are nice. But they aren't essential. And they aren't Christmas. They're just the outer wrappings. And everyone who understands anything at all about opening presents knows that the wrapping—no matter how nice it is—isn't the present. And let's never forget that.

[Slide 21] *Transition to communion*

[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . . ; those who are helping to serve communion please join me in the front . . .]

Benediction /Blessing

[Lift your hearts to heaven, and your hands if you like . . .]

Invite people to receive prayer; mention membership