

December 21, 2025—The Fourth Sunday of Advent
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God With Us

I find it really interesting to read Isaiah and Matthew quoting Isaiah, back to back like this. As Christians, thanks to the Gospel of Matthew, we're used to understanding Isaiah 7:14 as if Isaiah meant his words to apply to the birth of Jesus and only to the birth of Jesus. But that's not how King Ahaz understood Isaiah's words, and it's not how the Jewish scholars who decided to include these words from Isaiah in the canon of Hebrew Scriptures understood Isaiah's words, and it's not how Jewish people today understand Isaiah's words. Heck, it's probably not how the author of the Gospel of Matthew understood Isaiah's words.

So, let's look at the book of Isaiah itself. This passage comes right in the middle of two chapters that are all about God, through Isaiah, reassuring King Ahaz of Judah as he was embroiled in war with his neighbors to the north. And that reassurance is delivered in the form of signs—signs expressed in the names of three children. The first sign has Isaiah going out to meet King Ahaz with Isaiah's son in tow, and his son's name is Shear-jashub, which in Hebrew means, "a remnant shall return." God assures King Ahaz in the person of this first child that the attacks from the north will not succeed, that only a remnant of the mighty armies sent to conquer Judah will return to the lands they came from, and within some span of years, the prophet says, the northern kingdom of Ephraim "will be shattered, no longer a people." (Is. 7:8)

Then the second sign, which King Ahaz refused to ask for but Isaiah insisted on giving him anyway, is the assurance that a young woman currently with child will bear a son and name him Immanuel, which in Hebrew means, "God is with us." And by the time that child is born and weaned, so he's eating curds and honey instead of mother's milk, and he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the lands to the north will be deserted. Within just a couple of years, God promises King Ahaz, you'll have nothing more to fear from the kings of the lands to the north.

And then Isaiah goes on to give a third sign of reassurance to the king, going to his wife and conceiving a son and naming the poor kid Maher-shalal-hash-baz, which in Hebrew means, "the spoil speeds, the prey hastens," (Is. 8:3) whatever that means. I find it really amusing that the ancient Greek translation of Isaiah transliterates the names of the other two children, which is why Matthew has "Emmanuel," but it translates poor Maher-shalal-hash-baz's name as "Quickly Despoil, Swiftly Plunder." Anyway, the point is that by the time the child says his first words, "the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be carried away by the king of Assyria." (Is. 8:4) Again, God reassures King Ahaz, he has nothing to fear from his northern enemies—within the early years of these baby boys, those nations will be wiped out and left deserted.

So that's the original context of these verses from Isaiah. As Isaiah originally intended them, they're not really a prediction of a child to be born sometime in the future—Isaiah says that Immanuel will be born in just the next couple of months, since the young woman is already pregnant, and the child will see the downfall of Damascus and Samaria by the time he's weaned. If that's a prophecy, then it was fulfilled very soon after it was spoken, some seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus.

That's the thing about prophecy, though. It has a tendency to take on a life of its own. We assert in the Nicene Creed that the Holy Spirit "has spoken through the prophets"—and the Holy Spirit is still speaking to us through the words of the prophets. I think that's why we read the prophets, really, because they don't tell just one story. So when the author of the Gospel of Matthew says, "All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet," I don't think he meant that Isaiah foresaw the birth of Jesus and now that prophecy is complete.

I think Matthew, like many faithful people before him and since, lived his life in dialogue with the Scriptures, including the words of the prophets. I think he knew the original context of Isaiah's words, and he probably even knew that Isaiah wrote about a young woman, not

necessarily a virgin. But he believed that the Spirit is still speaking through the prophets. And he believed that the promises of God come to fulfillment in a variety of ways across the ages. And he was most interested not in what Isaiah said to King Ahaz but in what the Spirit might have to say through the words of Isaiah to Joseph and to Mary and to his readers sometime in the first century and maybe even to us.

Maybe especially to Joseph, because I actually think Matthew meant these words to be in the angel's mouth, part of what the angel said to Joseph. I imagine the angel reassuring Joseph just like Isaiah reassured King Ahaz, saying, it's OK, dear man, God is in this, God is with you, you do not need to be afraid.

And that was good enough for Joseph. To his lasting credit, Joseph believed the angel and did what the angel told him to do—he married his pregnant fiancée, and named her child Jesus, like the angel told him to do. And as far as we know, he raised Jesus as his own son, and taught him well.

So I think Matthew is saying to his original readers in the first century and to us, look: Isaiah saw a sign in the birth of a child—a child born in extraordinary times, in extraordinary circumstances, who stands as a sign of God's unfailing presence with us. In the same way, the birth of the child Jesus in extraordinary times, in extraordinary circumstances, is a fulfillment of God's presence with us in a way that Isaiah probably never could have imagined. This is God-with-us made a glorious reality beyond Isaiah's wildest dreams: God walking among us, living with us, bringing God's healing and wholeness into human lives.

God is with us. God is with us when, like King Ahaz, we are besieged by enemies on every side, and God is with us when, like Joseph, our dreams of life and love and marriage don't play out as we had imagined. And God is with us when, like the Psalmist, we feel like God has fed us with the bread of tears and given us bowls of tears to drink. God is with us. God is for us, God is on our side, God is here beside us, behind us, before us, within us. God is not distant and uncaring and unapproachable, God is with us. Closer than our breath or heartbeat. And when we suffer, God suffers. When we grieve, God grieves. When we weep, God weeps. God shares our sweat and our tears and our blood, our sorrow, our sickness, our weakness, our death—because God is with us, Emmanuel.

That simple fact—simple and wondrous and gracious and mind-blowing—that God is with us, has inspired saints throughout the ages to do amazing, incredible things. Because God is with us, we have stood against the might of empires in the name of the Prince of Peace and brought down tyrants, upended oppressive societies, and fostered equality among all people. And that simple, awesome fact, that God is with us, inspired Saint Joseph and countless people like him to do a simple, ordinary thing with great love: to marry his betrothed, to love her strange and beautiful child, and to raise him as his own.

Emmanuel! God is with us! May we take that assurance and in its tremendous power do great things or simple, ordinary things, always with great love.

Amen.