

Homily for December 20, 2018

Isaiah 7:10–14

Psalm 24:1–6

Luke 1:26–3

Today's readings present us with a theme of contrasts. Ahaz's fear and Mary's trust.

On the one hand, we have King Ahaz. He reigned in Jerusalem between 735 and 715 B.C. As we pick up the story here in Isaiah chapter 7 the King is fearful because his northern brother Israel has established a military allegiance with Syria. Rezin is the Syrian King and Pekah and king of Israel.

Remember that at this time in the Old Testament Story Judah is the southern kingdom, centered in Jerusalem and Israel is the Northern Kingdom, centered at Samaria.

The issue that concerns King Ahaz is that Rezin and Pekah are going to attack Jerusalem and replace King Ahaz with a vassal king, named Tabeel – which means “Good for nothing”. So Ahaz does what any calculating king who wants to protect his territory would do. He forms an alliance with the regional superpower - Assyria.

Isaiah the prophet gets word of what Ahaz has done and exhorts him to stop forging this alliance. To trust in Assyria is to not trust in God and will result in Ahaz compromising his faith and loyalty as the servant of the Lord. But such a compromise has already happened. Ahaz has offered gold from the Jerusalem Temple and from his own palace and has called himself Tiglath-pileser's son. In other words, he has “sold out”.

It is into this context that Isaiah speaks these words:

Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanu-el.

The word *almah* in Hebrew can be translated either as “young woman” or “virgin.” When the Gospel of Matthew quotes this verse from the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) to describe the Virgin Mary (Matthew 1:23), the more precise Greek word *parthenos* is chosen, which means “virgin.” In the Isaian context the son would probably be a son of Ahaz. The name Immanuel meaning “God with us” only occurs here in the Old Testament and expresses trust in the presence of God. The very thing Ahaz did not do.

So how is it that this passage has become so central to Matthew's story of the birth of Jesus?

The Catechism indicates that there is a literal sense and a spiritual sense of Scripture (CCC 115–117). Many Bible passages have an immediate literal interpretation and a deeper spiritual significance that is fulfilled later. So, in the literal sense, a young woman would bear a son in Isaiah's time, perhaps a son of Ahaz. But, at a later time that neither Isaiah nor Ahaz could have imagined, God would bring forth a greater fulfillment of this prophecy when a virgin would

conceive and bear a Child, who would actually be the God-man with us, the King of Kings who would redeem the world.¹

Here is the application of this passage that I want you to consider. Political alliances and power politics are always the most dominant stories each year. And while we are needing to be engaged and concerned about these stories, if they are the stories that control our thinking and feeling, like Ahaz, we will experience great fear and will not ask for signs from God.

If, however, we can look for the signs of God's presence always at work in the world in subtle and quiet ways we will not sell out to the world's interpretation of history's unfolding. Rather we will see in a virgin, giving birth to Immanuel the true king who in the end can alone rule the human heart.

This is because in the story of the Annunciation the essence of the biblical drama is distilled. I like how Bishop Robert Barron explains this in his book *Catholicism*:

*We see the nature of God on display in the graceful, nonviolent manner of the invitation of Gabriel to Mary. In story after story from the mythological tradition, we note that when the gods intervene in human affairs, they do so violently, interruptively, in the manner of a rape. But in the sweet invitation of the angel at the Annunciation, something altogether different is on display. Mary's freedom and dignity are respected, and her curiosity is encouraged; she is, if I can put it this way, courted by the heavenly messenger.*²

May we allow these last days of Advent be for us a time when we celebrate the nature of the inviting and courting God who gently and persistently says "I am Immanuel. God with you. Look, look for the signs of my presence – most especially here in the Mass where my presence is also my greatest present to you.

¹ Kosanke, C. G., & Manhardt, L. W. (2011). Isaiah (p. 19). Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing.

² Father Barron, Robert. *Catholicism: A Journey to the Heart of the Faith* (pp. 89-90). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.