

## Divergence on the Lectionary - The Fourth Sunday of Adventt, Year A

### First Reading

Isaiah 7:10–16

Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz: “Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test.” And he said, “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted. (ESV)

### Second Reading

Romans 1:1–7

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (ESV)

### Gospel Text

Matthew 1:18–25

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She

will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall call his name Immanuel”

(which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus. (ESV)

## Comments and Questions for Discussion

### First Reading

My eyes are aching from refreshing my recollections of the scholarly discussions of the prophecies in Isaiah 7 concerning the identities of the virgin of whom he spoke and the child to be named Immanuel. Suffice it to say that there are as many different opinions as there are scholars. I didn't read them all, and were I to try I think I'd be finishing this Divergence some time in June.

What I came away with was this, for whatever it's worth. Some of it I had remembered, some not.

First and foremost Isaiah did not have Jesus in mind when he prophesied this. He wasn't seeing hundreds of years into the future and predicting the birth of a child to the Virgin Mary. While that isn't what every scholar says, it seems to be what every scholar says who isn't desperate to preserve what Christians have made of Matthew's appropriation of the prophecy in 1:23. Insisting that this is what God meant when He spoke through Isaiah to Ahaz does violence to both the text of Isaiah and that of Matthew. Accepting that reality will require that we adjust our thinking about how New Testament thinkers and writers understood and used prophecy, but we'll talk more about that when we get to the Gospel text.

For now, let's look at Isaiah and see what it says when it stands on its own.

The setting of this prophecy is important for us to keep in mind. Isaiah is speaking to King Ahaz, who is near panic in the face of the the two kings (Rezin, king of Syria, and Pekah, king of Israel) who have come up against Judah and Jerusalem to take them. Isaiah has been sent to speak comfort to the king. The prophecy about the mother and child is for Ahaz, in that moment, about his own future and that of Judah.

This is why we can't get too caught up in the idea that Isaiah foresaw the miraculous birth of Jesus. Imagine for a moment that this is what God meant when He spoke with Ahaz through the prophet. Imagine trying to comfort a king by telling him about something that has absolutely nothing to do with his situation or that of his nation, something that won't occur until hundreds of years later, long after the destruction of his kingdom and the Temple, long after their return from 70 years of exile. That isn't how prophecy works. Prophecy is God speaking in the present about the present, and to some degree, the near future. About things that are real to the hearer.

So Isaiah is speaking about a real woman, who really existed at the time that Isaiah spoke. Who this young woman was is a matter of endless speculation. She may have been a woman betrothed to Isaiah himself. Or the wife of Ahaz. Or a woman about to be married to Ahaz. Or the mother of Hezekiah. Or she may just be a figurative reference to a nameless young woman in Jerusalem about to be married. There are more suggestions about this than I can count.

The point is that the woman is a contemporary of Isaiah who will soon be with child. And the child's name will be a sign that God is with you. That will be his name. And before the child is weaned (or perhaps reaches the age of moral agency, "refuse the evil and choose the good" may refer to either agency or choosing good food) he will eat curds and honey. The verses that come immediately after our reading go on to say that the kings that Ahaz fears will by that time be rulers of nothing but wasteland. But things will go only slightly better for Judah. For at that time God will bring upon Judah "such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah." (verse 17) For the king of Assyria will descend upon them.

It is a mixed blessing, this prophecy, but one fully grounded in the present reality of Ahaz and Judah. It is also important here to acknowledge that in Isaiah's prophecy there is no indication that the word translated for us as "virgin" must be translated that way. The word in Hebrew, "*almah*," refers to a young woman of marriageable age. One writer suggests that a better translation here would be "maiden." She would likely be a virgin, but not necessarily. There is another, better word in Hebrew for "virgin" that Isaiah would likely have chosen if he meant to emphasize that. What is also true is that the prophecy does not say that she will conceive *as a virgin*. At the time the prophecy is given, she is unmarried, assumed to be a virgin, but Isaiah doesn't say that the conception will in any way be miraculous.

When we let Isaiah speak for himself, without the weight that our reading of Matthew has added, what we find is the assurance that during some very troubling and dangerous times, God will be present, "with us." For us, the birth of the Christ Child in the stable in

Bethlehem is the most powerful expression of God's desire to be with us, but for Isaiah, there were others.

Question: Does that change anything about how we appreciate the Christmas miracle? It doesn't for me.

## Second Reading

Set in between the Isaiah and Matthew texts on this Fourth Sunday of Advent, our reading from Romans takes on overtones that Paul never intended. Paul doesn't show any evidence anywhere in his letters that he is aware of the stories of Jesus' birth that begin the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. When he says "which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures" he refers not to the person of Jesus Himself, but to the "Gospel of God" *concerning* Jesus Christ. For Paul, the prophecies are about the whole message of reconciliation and restoration promised in the prophets.

There are many, many prophecies in the Old Testament that do point directly at Jesus. Moses' prophecy that there would be one like himself to come after him, the prophecies concerning the king of David's line, lots of others. But I don't think that's what Paul is talking about here. I think that in this passage he refers to the broader promise of reconciliation with God that echoes throughout the prophets (even if they are often alongside prophecies of dire circumstances). If we just read these opening words to Romans carefully, that's what they say.

When we read a letter of Paul, it is very, very important to read it for what it is, a letter to a community that has a specific purpose. This sets the whole thing in context. And when we read this opening to the Letter to the Romans with that in mind something really pops. At least it does for me. The openings of Paul's letters always contain clues to what it is he wants to say in the body of the letter, almost like an abstract at the beginning of a scholarly article.

So what is the situation in Rome that prompts the letter? And how has that situation shaped this opening?

I've discussed my thoughts on the setting and purpose of Romans in earlier Divergences (2 Advent, Year A), but only fleetingly. I won't go into too much detail here, but I'll remind you that my approach to Romans has been shaped by the work of Mark Nanos and his book, "[The Mystery of Romans](#)." Nanos puts forward the idea that there is discord in the Roman church, discord between Christians and Jews who worship together. At this point in the life of early Christianity it was common for Christians to worship alongside their Jewish brethren. Among all the conquered peoples who lived

under Roman rule, only the Jews had been given license to continue to gather for worship that wasn't emperor worship. They were just too troublesome otherwise.

So early Christians, themselves descended from Judaism, found a safe haven among the Jews, a safe place to gather to worship God and Jesus, the synagogue. This had been the situation in Rome. Christians, the smaller group, had taken shelter with the Jews of Rome and found a home there. In contrast to what Paul found in Antioch, Gentile Christians (who had been urged to be circumcized in Antioch) were too heavily inclined to cast off their Jewish siblings as though they'd been superceded.

I can't begin to do better justice to Dr. Nanos' thesis in this limited context. (It's been at least 20 years since I read the book.) I linked it above and commend it to anyone who really wants to understand Romans. But given this concern of Paul's the opening verses we have in our reading for 4 Advent fall into focus.

If Paul is writing primarily to Gentile Christians in the church in Rome about their disregard for the Jews who once gave them sanctuary, then the words "which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures" make new sense. Paul is reminding them that the One in whom they believe, the one they worship, came to them via Judaism, was prophesied from the beginning within Judaism. Then he goes on to remind them that Jesus is descended from David. And finally he hints at his point for the letter, "to bring about the obedience of faith." He wants to get these Gentile Christians to behave toward their Jewish brothers and sisters in a way that reflects their indebtedness to them. He employs a variety of arguments and rhetorical devices throughout the letter to accomplish his ends, but the opening verses tell us where he's going. (As they do in all his letters.)

That Paul looks back to the prophets as a way of rooting the church in its relationship to Judaism echoes, or rather looks forward to Matthew's task and the way it works out in our Gospel text for this week.

### The Gospel Text

When I read these blessed stories surrounding the birth of Jesus, all I really want to do is curl up as I did when I was a child in a candle lit, gothic down-town church on Christmas Eve and listen. Soon we'll be listening to the story from Luke's Gospel, and I can scarcely hear it without also hearing it in the voice of Linus, from A Charlie Brown Christmas. These words are so blanketed, so imbued with memory and warmth that they resist study, but that is what the Divergence is for.

Our reading from Matthew for the Fourth Sunday of Advent comes immediately on the heels of the Evangelist's recitation of Jesus' genealogy. That it comes after, and not before the genealogy tells us a great deal, all by itself, a genealogy that makes it clear that Jesus is a Son of Abraham, the Son of David. Right from the beginning Matthew is making clear that this Jesus of Nazareth is the one about whom prophecy has spoken from the very beginning. He is utterly, indelibly Jewish.

I would like to take some time to talk about the remarkable things that Matthew says within that genealogy, but that would distract from our purpose this week, to focus on the Gospel text at hand. (But that genealogy is really worth the study. It's marvelous!)

Our reading begins, "Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way," and we are thrown into the controversy about Mary's being pregnant before she is properly married to her betrothed, Joseph. We get a much better sense of the man Joseph from Matthew than we do from Luke. He is a just man, a righteous man, and when he learns that the woman who will be his wife is pregnant, he decides to release her (divorce is an unfortunate translation, as it suggests that they were married, which I don't think they yet were) quietly, without fuss. So in addition to being righteous, he is merciful.

But more than that, Joseph is a dreamer. Like Joseph, son of Jacob, this Joseph is a dreamer. I don't think that it is coincidental that the story in Genesis of Joseph's adventures and his journey down into Egypt is immediately preceded by, "These are the generations of Jacob." In Genesis we have just read the names of the sons of Jacob and their children. It roots the story in the bloodline of Abraham, just as Matthew has done for Jesus.

As we work our way through Matthew this year, Year A, there is one thing we need to keep foremost in our awareness of the Gospel. It was written for a Jewish congregation, probably somewhere in the region of Syria. It was also written for a Jewish congregation in the wake of Paul and the larger (he wasn't the only one evangelizing them) Gentile mission. I think it's almost impossible to overstate the importance of Matthew's task to root the story of Jesus in Judaism, especially after centuries of Christian anti-semitism, some intentional and some not.

Matthew's congregation continues to experience the depredations of Jews living under Roman rule. They see the preaching of Jesus reaching out and taking hold among the unclean, the Gentiles and in many ways surpassing the growth of their belief in the Middle East. I don't find it difficult to imagine that this feels something like a betrayal to them, to those who have struggled for centuries under foreign domination, foreign godlessness to remain true to the Torah, to the One True God. Has God abandoned them?

Matthew's answer is a firm "No." Everything that is happening is in fact a fulfillment of all that they have hoped for, all that they were promised. The stories that have become the Book of Acts are all Jewish stories, it is all rooted in the promises made to Abraham. And so Matthew tells the story of Jesus in a way that highlights this truth, over and over and over again.

I am one among a relative few who maintain that Matthew was in fact the first Gospel written. In the years preceding the writing of the Gospel According to Matthew there were lots of stories floating around the Middle East about Jesus and what He'd said and done. The stories had been collected and redistributed, but no one had tried to put them into an orderly form. Matthew did. He *invented* the genre we now know as a "gospel." Yes, it bears resemblances to other kinds of texts from the first century, but it stands alone as the first of its kind.

And it was written by someone who was very Jewish (I have earlier suggested that Matthew was more than a scribe, perhaps a pharisee himself.) for a congregation that was very Jewish. Written by a Jewish heart for Jewish hearts. The Gospel itself is easily divided into five segments, paralleling the books of the Torah.

And it begins with Joseph. And Matthew is careful to elicit as many echoes of one of the heroes of Genesis as he can. Joseph's story starts after a listing of his ancestors and his family. So does the story of the Joseph of Matthew. And our Joseph is guided by dreams, just as his namesake was.

Matthew was clearly aware that Mary was a virgin, and remained a virgin until after she gave birth to Jesus. Her pregnancy would have been an embarrassment to early Christians, a scandal to Jews. Matthew does with Mary's pregnancy what God had done with the scandal of the Cross. He makes it an emblem of the glory of God. God at work in a way that appears to be cloaked in shame, but is in fact bathed in glory. And he remembers the saying from Isaiah, and grounds the present in the echoes of the past. He does the same later, when Joseph takes his family to Egypt (just as the Joseph of Genesis had done) when he quotes Hosea, "Out of Egypt have I called my son." He knows very well that Hosea is speaking very specifically about the Exodus. He doesn't mean that Hosea was speaking about Jesus. He is simply grounding his story in the echoes of the past, linking everything always back into the Law and the Prophets.

This way of interpreting the sacred texts was not foreign to Matthew's Jewish hearers. The rabbis enjoyed considerable freedom in the interpretation of texts that weren't specific to the Law, the way of walking, to Halakha. This non-legal discussion of Scripture was known as "Aggadah" and could at times be rather fanciful or mystical. For

Matthew (whose training I still maintain was greater than that of a scribe) to make this allusion to the past is not unfaithful to the texts he cites. But as I said above, we do violence to both Matthew and Isaiah (and Hosea) if we try to turn those prophetic texts into predictions.

What Matthew does in our reading today is to talk to Jews like a Jew about Jesus. And that's what he's going to continue to do throughout the Gospel. We'll see that time and again this year.

That teaches me something else about God, and about how the Gospel works. It teaches me that the Gospel finds a way of expressing itself in every culture, every situation. God inspired Matthew to write this text to one group of people in one context, and He inspired Mark and Luke and John to write it in very different ways to other people in other contexts. There are certain elements that remain consistent throughout, but God also inspired the people who assembled the texts that we now call the Bible to include four very different Gospels. If that isn't God yelling at me "Don't get caught up in the details! Be inspired to find expression for the Gospel in your own context!" I don't know what is.