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**Isaiah 7:10–14**      New Living Translation

<sup>10</sup> Later, the LORD sent this message to King Ahaz: <sup>11</sup> “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.”

<sup>12</sup> But the king refused. “No,” he said, “I will not test the LORD like that.”

<sup>13</sup> 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? <sup>14</sup> All right then, the Lord himself will give you the sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means ‘God is with us’).

**Luke 1:26–35**      New Living Translation

<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. <sup>28</sup> Gabriel appeared to her and said, “Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!”

<sup>29</sup> Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean.

<sup>30</sup> “Don’t be afraid, Mary,” the angel told her, “for you have found favor with God!

<sup>31</sup> You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. <sup>33</sup> And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!”

<sup>34</sup> Mary asked the angel, “But how can this happen? I am a virgin.”

<sup>35</sup> The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God.

## **The power of prophesy.**

Our first Bible quote today needs some background explanation. Here is the setting. At this point in time, what we know as Israel is broken into two fragments, Israel and Judah. Remember that the prophets acted as intermediaries between God and God's people in the Old Testament. In our first passage, we are listening to a conversation between the great prophet Isaiah and King Ahaz, who rules Judah, around the year 735 B.C. Assyria, a powerful empire, is threatening Israel. Although in the future, Assyria will indeed overrun Israel, at this point in time, Assyria is still moving south, toward Israel. The kings of Israel and Syria have made a pact of mutual defense against Assyria. Ahaz, however, has hesitated about joining the alliance against Assyria, and so only a portion of Israel would be joining Syria to fight Assyria. In desperation, Syria and Israel are planning on forcing Ahaz out of power and putting a puppet king in his place, someone who will join their alliance against the great power, Assyria.

Ahaz is torn between two fears. He is afraid of a joint invasion by Syria and Israel. But he is also afraid of standing up to Assyria. He thinks that perhaps if he submits to Assyrian rule, Assyria will leave him in place as the king of Judah. As our first reading unfolds, the prophet Isaiah is trying to get Ahaz to forget about both of these alliances, to stand up to Israel and Syria, and to stand up to Assyria,

as well – and go it alone. Isaiah, perhaps the greatest prophet in the Old Testament, wants Ahaz to simply trust in God. Isaiah even offers to let Ahaz choose what he would like to see as the perfect sign from God that he will win. Ahaz can name the prophesy that must come true for him to know that Assyria will fail against him. But Ahaz refuses. Ahaz has almost no faith in God.

So, in frustration, Isaiah comes up with a prophesy himself. Isaiah says that a virgin will give birth.

Our concern this morning isn't the outcome of the conflict between Assyria and Judah, but I can say that because Ahaz did not turn to God, Judah did fall to Assyria.

What we're concerned with is the specific prophesy that Isaiah came up with, that there would be a virgin who would give birth. This is the first Sunday of Advent, and so, we now look at our second Bible passage today. It is from Luke, and there is a similar passage in Matthew. Here's an interesting fact, as an aside – neither John nor Mark write about the virgin birth. We've discussed in a previous sermon the fact that Matthew and Luke might have used as a common reference a document that has disappeared from history. It is referred to as Q. Perhaps this text, Q, which both of them had access to, had a reference to a virgin birth. So, either the writer of Q put into his writing, or Matthew and Luke independently,

put into their writings a statement about Jesus being born to a virgin. At face value, it seems to be related to this statement in Isaiah. Was the virgin birth of Jesus an outcome of the prophecy promised by Isaiah to King Ahaz, in Isaiah's attempt to get Ahaz to put his full trust in God?

That is a common interpretation. Of course, we might ask what good would it do to for Isaiah to promise Ahaz that a virgin would give birth, if it wasn't going to happen for three quarters of a millennium? Was Ahaz going to wait until Jesus was born to decide that the prophecy was true and that he could therefore trust God to protect him?

Or maybe the author of Q, or both Luke and Matthew independently, decided that this little piece of Isaiah was cool, and so it would make a nice bit to add to the story of Jesus' birth. That's what a lot of non-believers say.

A common claim, by the way, is that the Hebrew word used to describe this "virgin" that Isaiah refers to actually means "young woman". That Hebrew word in Isaiah is *Almah*. Greek translations of Isaiah, which were of course written later, do indeed use the word *Parthenos*, which does literally mean "virgin". But the claim is that the original word in Isaiah does indeed mean "young woman". So, the obvious point is that a young woman having a baby is about as novel as a tall guy playing basketball.

Some say that the young woman Isaiah is referring to his wife. It's true that in another place in Isaiah, his children are referred to as "signs" from God. So, some say that all Isaiah was saying was that his child would be born soon, and that this would be a special sign that Ahaz can trust God. There's another statement in Isaiah that can be interpreted as suggesting that while the child is still very young, Assyria will fail to conquer Judah. This would presumably happen only if Ahaz believes the prophesy.

Others have suggested that rather than this birth of a child being a reference to Isaiah's child, this passage is using a young woman as a metaphor for the nation of Israel. By saying that this young woman will give birth, Isaiah is telling Ahaz that a remnant Israel, a child of Israel, to speak metaphorically, will survive in the end. Isaiah is warning Ahaz that because Ahaz doesn't trust God, that remnant will consist of those who gather around Isaiah, rather than Ahaz's people. Ahaz's nation will not survive – because he does not believe.

So, what's the point here? Soon, we will be celebrating the birth of Jesus. Our tradition and our Bible say that Jesus was born to a virgin, that the true father of Jesus was God the Father, not Joseph the man. It is also a well-established part of Christian doctrine that Jesus was indeed the result of a virgin birth. This, many

say, is the only way that Jesus can truly be both man and God – he must have one parent who is a human and one parent who is God.

But the truth is that Scripture, the Holy Bible, is a complex document written over a period of thousands of years, by many, many authors. It can be confusing, simply from the way it is structured. And there are many debates about how various Hebrew words in the Old Testament and Greek words in the New Testament have been translated, and how this impacts our interpretation of the Bible. Further, the Bible has been interpreted many different ways, and often it has to do with a literal, versus a symbolic interpretation. What we have to be careful about as believers, as the faithful, is that we don't let our faith become like the faith of Ahaz, something that is weak, something that can fail when challenged. As we head into Christmas, we need to look into our hearts and find our faith there. It is not tied up in the long, long history, covering many hundreds of years, of academic discourse about the true interpretation of the Bible.

I used to be an academic. It was my life for thirty-five years and I understand the drive to turn argument into an artform, to take great pleasure in taking a controversial opinion and arguing the hell out of it.

But just before I took that job as a professor, while I was still a young man, I went to the Holy Land. I admit, I had just finished graduate school and my

primary reason for going was to deliver my first academic paper at a conference. But I chose to stay on, after the conference, and tour Israel. I went to the Old City of Jerusalem which is made out of a beautiful white sandstone; I went on a rugged hiking tour of the desert; I floated in the Dead Sea; and I went to Ein Gedi, the desert Oasis where David hid from King Saul. I even went into the occupied territory called the Gaza Strip.

I also went to Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus. It's on the West Bank and it is a Palestinian town, just south of Jerusalem. There is a church there that was built in the 500's, and it is where Christians traditionally make their pilgrimage to honor the spot where Jesus was born. It's called the Church of the Nativity, and at least when I was there, it was pretty beat up. But it was astonishing to stand there. I was where the Virgin gave birth to the Savior.

I did not stop and ponder what that Hebrew word in the Bible meant, whether it meant virgin or young woman. I just stood there, thinking about that prophesy in Isaiah, about the one who would be born. The one called Immanuel - "God is with us". I could feel God's presence and I could hear the prophesy.

As we move into the Christmas season, we are reminded of the Easter-and-Christmas Christians, the ones who come to church a couple of times a year, for the tradition of it. To sing happy songs about the birth of a holy child, to hold

candles – do we do this here, by the way? I haven't served a Christmas here yet, and I don't know. Now, I don't begrudge people who come to church a couple of times a year. It's better than never coming. It might be that they are keeping a flame alive. Perhaps many of them are truly godly people who live according to the will of God and the example of Jesus. Perhaps only a few of them are simply twice-a-year believers and most of them lead extremely honorable lives.

But this time of the year, we need to remember a key aspect of Christian faith – and that is prophesy. It's what separates nonstop believers from twice-a-year believers. Yes, we believe that Jesus' birth was the fulfillment of prophesy.

And there is something more fundamental about prophesy and faith. There are many more passages in the Old Testament, what is often now called the Hebrew Bible, that arguably prophesize about the coming of the Messiah. It's not just this highly debated passage in Isaiah. In sum, there are multiple Old Testament passages that suggest the coming of a Messiah; the focus of much of the Old Testament is on the works of the Prophets; the actions of Jesus and John the Baptist resemble those of the prophets; and there are many other references to prophets in the New Testament. We see that prophesy is a major aspect of our faith. Over the two thousand years since the birth of Jesus, Christian tradition has also embraced prophesy as something fundamental to our beliefs.

Indeed, prophesy is what makes us Christians. Prophecy acknowledges that it is God who owns the truth, not us. By believing that the promises of God are what matter, not the promises of humans, we declare ourselves as the faithful. Only when a human is literally speaking for God – as the prophets and Jesus did – are humans truly speaking the truth. And it might be that there are no more prophets to come. All we have is our Bible, our traditions, and our faith.

This is the first Sunday of Advent. We are anticipating the birth of Jesus. Prophecy is the voice of God on earth and we are getting ready for the most powerful voice that ever lived on this planet. Jesus spoke the truth like no other person. When we need the truth, it is Jesus to whom we turn. If we could not accept prophesy than we certainly could not accept Jesus and welcome him into our world on December 25.

There is something subtle, but fundamental about prophesy in Christian faith today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is prophesy that opens our minds to an alternative way of thinking, something that stands in stark contrast to the selfish, consumer-oriented, dominant society around us. Prophecy is the word of God coming through loud and clear, unsilenced and unaltered by a world that tells us that nothing is more important than what possessions and power we can obtain here on Earth. Prophecy is the power of our faith.