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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
Advent 4
December 18, 2022

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, time is getting short...

We are only a week out from Christmas...

Indeed, as I noted in our announcements, today is the fourth Sunday of Advent...

And on this fourth Sunday of Advent, seven days from the great event...

On this Sunday we read Matthew's version of the story of Jesus' birth.

And as we hear this story, we can't help but note that Jesus' birth caused a few shock waves to say the least in the lives of both Mary and Joseph, the parents of Jesus.

Of course we remember that the angel Gabriel came to Mary and told her that she had found favor with God.

That she would be the mother of the Son of God—no small shock wave to be sure. This is in Luke's version of Jesus' birth.

And, Gabriel appears to Mary, tells her that she would be the mother of God's Son, and Mary then asks, "How can this be, since I am still a virgin?"

And so Gabriel told her that the power of the Holy Spirit would come upon her and she would conceive a child.

And Mary says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word."

And, of course, we can only imagine the great difficulties this news caused for Mary, who may have been all of 12 years old.

Indeed, Mary's pregnancy would have been seen as scandalous.

She was pregnant, and not by her betrothed Joseph.

So, it would no doubt have appeared that she had been unfaithful.

And unfaithfulness, adultery, was punishable by death.

This may explain why, in Luke's gospel, Mary goes off to see her relative Elizabeth.

Her family actually may have sent Mary off to protect her from the legal ramifications of her pregnancy.

No, it couldn't have been easy for Mary. The news that she would bear a child by the Holy Spirit was a shock wave.

Nor would it have been easy for Joseph.

Here is this man engaged to Mary, who finds out that his betrothed is pregnant, by some other man, presumably.

His conclusion surely is that Mary has been unfaithful to him.

And it was certainly Joseph's prerogative to bring his betrothed up on charges of infidelity.

But our text today says, that Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose his betrothed to public humiliation and even death...being a righteous man, Joseph decides to break off the engagement quietly.

Joseph must have felt betrayed. He must have felt heartbroken. This news was a shock wave in his own life.

But then, he has this strange dream, where a messenger from God, an angel of the Lord, comes and says, "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."

And the text says, "Joseph awoke and took Mary as his wife."

Wow! Joseph puts aside all his doubts about Mary, because of a dream!

Now granted, dreams carried a lot of weight in the ancient world.

The ancients believed that God could and did speak through dreams.

We can think of another famous Joseph from the Old Testament who received divine messages in his dreams.

Even so, we can't help but be amazed at Joseph here. We can't help but be amazed at his willingness to stand beside Mary, to ride this shock wave with her.

PAUSE

Now, truth be told, Joseph is a bit of an enigma in the story of Jesus.

For whereas Mary is present throughout the life of Jesus, even appearing at Jesus' crucifixion, the figure of Joseph drops out from the gospels pretty early on.

Some scholars suggest that Joseph died when Jesus was still young, because the last we hear of Joseph is when he and Mary were travelling back from visiting the Temple, and Jesus has gone missing.

We remember that story, right?

Mary and Joseph return and find Jesus in the Temple.

After that event, Joseph disappears from the narrative.

PAUSE

In addition to this strange detail of "what happens to Joseph?", the story of Jesus' birth as a whole is quite strange, and the strangeness seems to hinge on this idea that Jesus is born of a virgin.

That is not something that happens every day.

And I mentioned two weeks ago that the Hebrew word "almah" the Hebrew word meaning "young woman" in Isaiah, is replaced in Matthew with the Greek word "parthenos," the Greek word for "virgin."

You can see the substitution in our readings today. The first reading today, from Isaiah 7 reads "Look, the YOUNG WOMAN is with child and shall bear a son."

But then in the gospel reading, it says, "Look, the VIRGIN shall conceive and bear a son."

Why the change? What is going on?

Well, scholars believe that the translator chose an unfortunate substitute for the Hebrew word "almah," young woman. The translator chose "parthenos," that is virgin.

You see, the Old Testament was translated into Greek, and this translation of the Old Testament was called the Septuagint.

The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, was produced for Jews who were living in the Greek speaking areas in the ancient Roman Empire, outside the Holy Land.

A lot of Jews in the far-flung regions of the Roman Empire were familiar with Greek, and so the Septuagint was produced to accommodate that need. And when the Hebrew Bible was translated into the Greek, there in Isaiah 7, the word “young woman” gets translated as “virgin.”

And so, when the early Church began to glean the Old Testament for texts which they felt were talking about Jesus, they came across this text from Isaiah 7:14.

Only they were using the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the version where the word *almah*, “young woman” in the Hebrew had been replaced with *parthenos*, “virgin” in the Greek.

And that led to all kinds of challenges for the early Church.

If Jesus was born of a virgin, how do we explain that?

The church presumably knew Mary and Joseph were Jesus’s parents.

But the early Church had to go back and work into the story of Jesus’ birth this detail that his mother was a virgin, because the prophecy in Isaiah says Jesus was born of a virgin?

And so we see the dilemma, and we see the product of the early church, in the story we have today.

Now, it is possible that the early church preferred the Greek version of prophecy from Isaiah to speak of Jesus’ birth, because it emphasized Jesus was born of a Virgin, untainted by sin.

And who knows, maybe the early Church figured the earlier Hebrew version of the prophecy referred to the circumstances Isaiah was addressing specifically in Isaiah’s time, and the later Greek version of Isaiah’s prophecy was a sort of new prophecy specifically referring to Jesus.

Regardless the detail of a virgin birth created challenges...

Such that Jesus' mother then had to be conceived by the Holy Spirit.

If Mary had a husband, how could the virgin birth be explained, except that Mary got pregnant by the Holy Spirit, but had no marital relations with Joseph until later.

And how do we explain how Mary and Joseph got married at all, for certainly, any normal man would have dismissed his betrothed.

And so, the dream episode is included in the story.

You see all the challenges associated with the detail in the story of Jesus's birth, the detail about Jesus being born of a virgin.

But ultimately what does it all matter? Except for this...

All of this was seen as God's plan. All of this was seen as God's plan.

That is the great miracle of the birth of Jesus.

That God has laid out this plan, a plan spanning centuries in fact, spanning as far back as Isaiah.

But in truth, God's plan spans back to the dawn of time, when in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, and then the Word is made flesh at Christmas.

God's plan is set in motion from time immemorial, and God's plan must correlate to the prophecy outlined in God's plan, which is why then the story of Jesus' birth ultimately must take into consideration the Virgin birth noted in Isaiah.

PAUSE

What is truly fascinating, though, and where God's plan speaks to us is with respect to the eternal aspect of the Word.

We got talking about this very thing in Adult Sunday School a couple weeks back.

In Sunday School, we noted that yes, Jesus is born at the time of Christmas. That is God's plan.

But if Jesus is eternal, then Jesus was part of God's plan and so must be present somewhere in the Old Testament.

If Jesus is eternal he must show up even before his birth.

And, it was Luther who in fact said that Jesus is actually everywhere present in the Old Testament.

Anytime we hear a prophet say for instance “Thus, says the Word of the Lord” in the Old Testament, there is Jesus, because there is the Word, before it was made flesh. The prophets declare God’s Word, which in truth is Jesus.

As an aside, we can think of those Red Letter editions of the Bible, where in the New Testament, everywhere Jesus speaks the print is in red. Remember those red letter editions of the Bible?

Well, in truth, much of the Old Testament should also be in red print, especially where the prophets are proclaiming God’s Word.

And even at the dawn of time, when God created the cosmos by speaking creation into being, “Let there be light. Let there be seas and dry land” so forth and so on.

When God was speaking creation into being, Jesus was there, because God was speaking the Word in order to create.

So Creation should be in red print too.

Thus, we see that Jesus has always been there as part of God’s plan. Jesus has always been active in God’s plan, as the Word.

And Luther then took this notion of Jesus presence throughout the Old Testament a step further so as to say that the Church has always existed as well throughout time.

Because wherever you have the Word abiding with God’s people, you have the Church.

God’s Word had come to the Jewish people at the time of the Jewish kings, and God’s Word came to the Judges, and God’s Word came to Moses, and to the patriarchs, and to Noah and his family, and all the way back to Adam and Eve’s son Seth.

Whenever God’s Word abided with God’s people, even just a small group of God’s people, wherever God’s Word abided with God’s people in the Bible, there was the Church, so said Martin Luther.

In effect, then, Luther said the Church existed since the earliest times, because the Word had abided with God's people.

And so God's plan for the Church has been going on for eons, and the powerful message is that even down to this day then, God's people, include us, have been swept up in that plan.

You and I, we, as members of the Church, we are caught up in God's plan.

That is what Mary and Joseph understood all too well at the time of the birth of their baby.

God's Word abided with Mary when Gabriel relayed the divine message to her that she would have a child, and she agreed to be God's servant, and give birth to this promised child.

And God's Word abided with Joseph when he was told to take Mary as his wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. And he faithfully fulfilled God's command.

Mary and Joseph were caught up in God's plan because the Word abided with them.

They were caught up in that movement called the Church that had been on the move since even the earliest of human history.

And I believe that we should find it truly comforting to know that each of us as well is personally caught up in something so powerful, something timeless, we are caught up in this shock wave rolling forward.

We are caught up in God's plan, and God will not forsake us.

We might dare call this shock wave, this tsunami Emmanuel. God with us, God is never letting us His people, His Church go.

God is carrying us, propelling us forward as part of God's plan to his final vision of His glory.

This is the shock wave, rolling on eternally. This is Emmanuel, God with us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.