

Rejoice!

Matthew 1:18-25; Isaiah 7:10-16

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Today's Gospel lesson is a scandal for us. It is a strange story for us to tell; an odd message to proclaim – "The child engendered in her came from the holy spirit."

Does it help us if we understand the passage in Isaiah better? In its historical context, Judah is besieged and the unrighteous King Ahaz seems intent on making an alliance with a foreign power, an alliance that might bring ruin upon the people. Instead he is asked to trust in God, but Ahaz refuses. God offers a sign anyway. The sign, if you read the passage closely, is not the pregnant girl, it is the name given to the baby – "God with us," Immanuel.

Does it help if we realize the young girl in Isaiah wasn't a virgin, was probably already pregnant, that Isaiah probably pointed to some young woman who was present there? That the word was translated as "virgin" by the Greek Septuagint and therefore entered our collective memories? And that most scholars of the Hebrew believe "young woman" to be a more appropriate translation?

Is the scandal momentarily alleviated if we get a better grasp of how and why Matthew used this Isaiah story and others like it in telling the Jesus story? That he wanted to connect this remarkable life he had witnessed with the grand story of God at work with God's people?

Or that he wanted to challenge the master narrative of the Roman Empire? For Rome also claimed a divine conception. Caesar Augustus was said to be the child of Apollo, the God of Light. Matthew is subversively claiming that the Son of God is not the Emperor, but is, instead, the child of Bethlehem.

Does any of that make this story any less scandalous, any less controversial, any easier to grasp?

I hope not.

Because if this story is anything less than a mystery which challenges our thinking, then it is not good news in which we can rejoice.

The great fourteenth century German mystic Meister Eckhart proclaimed:

It would be of little value for me that 'the Word was made flesh' for man in Christ as a person distinct from me, unless he was also made flesh for me personally so that I too might be God's son.

Eckhart taught us to view the birth of Christ not solely as a past historical event, but as everlastingly present. The birth of Christ is on-going, in that through the Holy Spirit, Jesus is born anew in us.

Going back to St. Irenaeus in the second century the Christian doctrine of the incarnation has been expressed in the phrase "God became human so that humanity might

become God.”

God’s reign has invaded this world. That’s the deep theological truth behind the story which Matthew tells.

God’s reign has invaded this world. The heavens have been ripped open and God’s Spirit has been set loose, renewing creation. The divine image in each of us is alight with the true Light of the World, Jesus Christ. Our humanity is awakened. We now are able to achieve our full potential as human beings. It doesn’t matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you have received the right and the power to become a child of God. You are the adopted sons and daughters of the Most High.

God’s reign has invaded this world and creation can now become what God has always hoped and dreamed that it would be. The unity of all creation is on its way.

God is the power for the future, the consummation of human history. And where do we find God? Not on Caesar’s throne. Not in the presidential palace. Not in the corporate office. Not in the university lecture hall or the science lab or the surgery.

No, Matthew tells us, God’s spirit is found at work in a Jewish peasant girl. In the scandalous child she is about to birth. In an ordinary carpenter, from an ordinary village, in a part of the world that you might have otherwise overlooked.

Caesar’s throne, the presidential palace, the corporate office, the university lecture hall, the science lab, and the surgery, for all their positive benefits to humankind, are not ultimately what will transform creation. They are not the source of justice, love, peace, and hope. They are not the end of the story, the consummation of human history. They are not the sign you have been looking for.

The sign is “God with us,” Immanuel. God with us there in the pregnant young woman of Isaiah. God with us there in the child of Mary. God with us there in the dream of Joseph. And if God is with us in these instances, if the great Creator of all that is and ever will be is present in the womb of this scandalously pregnant teenage girl . . .

Then let us rejoice! Because it means that God can be *with* us. Is *with* us. *In* us. The divine image in each of us awakened. The Christ born anew in each of us.

Joy to the world, our Sovereign is coming
Let every heart prepare Christ room.