

# Sermon Text for December 24, 2023

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

## *Isaiah 7:10-14 and Matthew 1:18-25* *“So this is Christmas”*

The kids have been working hard on the Christmas pageant. I hope you all come to see them at 4:30 this evening. We should get you home before it is dark. But Christmas pageants while cute and crowd pleasers are also fraught with danger as far as the theological message that they are sending off. My father used to tell the story of when he was a pastor and the kids practiced their lines and one little boy who was the angel Gabriel was so ready for his lines that he had practiced them and practiced them for weeks. He was sure that he knew them, but when it came time for him to appear before Mary and to tell her of the good news the line he was supposed to say: Hail Mary, blessed are you among women, completely left his mind. He knew the story and he had an idea of what he was supposed to say so he took a flier and pointed at Mary and said: Zap, you're pregnant. I may have told that one a few times before.

We find ourselves in Matthew for our final sermon on Advent in Gospels and like Christmas pageants Matthew is a strange and wonderful mixture of the miraculous and the mundane, the divine and the human, the supernatural and the ordinary. We find a miraculous conception of a young virgin through the power of God. We see in this Gospel an ordinary birth, also in Luke, quiet, nondescript, here barely even mentioned and certainly not one to cause a whole lot of attention, until we get to the next chapter. But we are still in Advent, so we are not in the next chapter yet, so the stillness of the story captures us for a moment.

Our task this morning, before we caught up in the fanfare of this evening, is to identify the miraculous and the ordinary in our own lives and know that God is present in both of those experiences, the mundane and the divine. Both of our Scriptures identify the presence of God in Emmanuel and require that we put ourselves in a position to be ready for his coming. Both of these Scriptures allow us to take a step back and say: So, this is Christmas.

### **READ**

Let's turn to our Isaiah Scripture and in it we find a gift directly from God which allows us to understand the presence of God in our lives. Let's set the stage a bit as we do pretty much every Sunday for every Scripture just so that we are not wondering what the heck is happening in the context of this King that I've never heard about. We find ourselves with King Ahaz who was the king of Judah, which was Israel and where Jerusalem was located so also where the Temple

of God was located. And he had a very close relationship with God and God would speak to him through the prophet Isaiah.

But he didn't always believe what God was telling him through Isaiah, including today where God was telling him that he could go into battle and win the battle because God was actually on his side and would fight for him. So here he is not 100% sure that God was with him as he prepared for battle so he wasn't sure he should lead his people into battle and God says: fine, if you don't believe me then ask for a sign, you know, like Gideon did with the fleece, and I'll give you a sign. Ahaz says no, I won't ask for a sign because I'm not even sure I want to know that you are on my side because that means that then I'll have to go into battle.

God gets kinda frustrated with him and says fine, I'll give you a sign anyway. Since you are not convinced that I am on your side, one of your young wives, a young girl, will have a child and that child will be a son and she will name him Emmanuel. When Emmanuel comes into the world then that will be proof to you that I am on your side, since, after all as we all know, Emmanuel means, God with us.

Emmanuel is ultimately a sign that God is with us at a time when we need to know that God is indeed with us. Christmas is a reminder that God is with us, that God is on our side, especially in those times when we need him most. So, this is Christmas. Anyone here need a sign this morning that God is on your side, that God loves you, that God wants you to succeed, that God is cheering for you, that God is holding your hand, that God is working behind the scenes to make all things work for the good? When we say that the world needs Jesus we say at in a way that means that we need a sign that will allow people to trust and obey.

Who needs to hear that God is on your side this Christmas Eve morning? God has you here this morning to receive a sign directly from him and that sign is: God is on your side, he is with you, yes you, even and especially now. There is no miracle in Isaiah. The word in vs.14 is young woman in the Hebrew, it is Matthew who defines Mary as a virgin, which she was. But for Isaiah, there is no miracle, just a baby born as a reminder.

But for Matthew, on the other hand, Jesus, our Emmanuel, is so much more than just a sign to encourage His people. It is more than just a reminder to lift our spirits. Matthew is such an wonderful combination of miracle and mundane that carries us all the way into Christmas at the end of our reading. Before we get there let's see what this Scripture tells us and vs. 18 tell us a lot. Mary is the mother of Jesus, but she was only engaged to Joseph, they weren't married. Since they weren't married we can assume that they had no sexual relations so it is a bit of a mystery as to how Mary was pregnant. They are probably both virgins, not just Mary.

But she is pregnant and this first verse again tells us that as she was found to be with child we have a disclaimer that it is directly from the Holy Spirit. There is the miraculous and you can miss it if you are just focusing on the drama and the gossip that comes with being a single unwed mom with a man who agrees to take you because he is righteous, but apparently she is righteous as well. The reader knows that this child is from the Holy Spirit, but apparently Joseph doesn't know because he hasn't been told yet, that comes a few verses later when he is told about the origin of this baby and the importance of this baby and what this baby's name means.

That's a lot in one verse. It can leave you with the same question that Mary asks the angel in the Gospel of Luke 1:34 – look it up and tell me what is the question that we might find ourselves asking just after this single verse? How can this be? Nothing on earth has been seen like this before and in our ordinary lives this type of extraordinary thing just doesn't happen, or at least I haven't noticed it happen.

We can keep moving ahead in this Christmas story and think we know what Christmas is all about but we will then miss the combination of miracle and mundane, so much so that it is hard to see where God starts and where the normal course of action with babies takes over. Matthew makes the Word become flesh real, it is set within the context of real life, real events, the gossip that must have swirled around Mary and him so much so that he was forced to divorce her and had decided to do so. This is real life stuff here.

What was Christmas to Joseph? It was an angel, again the supernatural, the divine hand, appearing to him in a dream and explaining what is happening to him and for him and giving him 7 tasks to undertake. 1) He is reminded that he is the Son of David, 2) He is told not to be afraid, 3) told to marry Mary, 4) tells him that she is pregnant by the Holy Spirit, which we knew already but he did not, 5) she will bear a son, 6) Joseph is responsible for naming him Jesus, 7) Jesus means God save, and this Jesus, is the Messiah, the one who will indeed save the people from their sins.

Christmas is a mix of miracle and mundane, passive obedience and active righteousness. We read that he was a righteous man, and we read that like Mary he passively receives this message, but then he actively obeys by putting all of these 7 things into action. Christmas is a time to passively obey, to trust that God is made flesh even though it may not make sense and we ask like Mary: How can this be. But then we have to go into action to do all that God has called us to do. We are not called to sit around and marvel in the divine, we are called to act in the ordinary.

When Matthew does finally get to the birth it is in a passive sense and it describes more the relationship between Mary and Joseph before and after the birth than it does the birth itself. The Savior of the World has come into the world, this is Christmas. It is a wonderful reminder to all of us that God is with us exactly in a time when we need to be reminded that God is with us and in a way that mixes the divine with the ordinary. Now go out into the world and do that which is divine through the ordinary means that God has given us. Amen.