

# *Christmas Can Still Change the World*

**WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY**

4<sup>th</sup> in a four-part Advent series

December 19, 2010

©2010 Scott L. Engle

*Isaiah 7:10–16 (NRSV)*

<sup>10</sup> Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, <sup>11</sup> Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. <sup>12</sup> But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. <sup>13</sup> Then Isaiah said: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? <sup>14</sup> Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. <sup>15</sup> He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. <sup>16</sup> For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

*Matthew 1:18–25 (NRSV)*

<sup>18</sup> Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup> But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

<sup>23</sup> “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel,”

which means, “God is with us.” <sup>24</sup> When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup> but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

*Christ’s birth is coming fast upon us. Though Jesus was born more than 2,000 years ago, Christmas can still change the world. May we have ears to hear and eyes to see.*

*Imagine . . . imagine that you are a carpenter in a Galilean village more than 2000 years ago. You are Jewish. You worship YHWH and you tend to your own business. You pay your taxes to the Romans and stay out of the way when their patrols come through your village. All in all, you and those you love lead a pretty good life.*

But . . . deep within your heart there burns a fire, a shining hope -- the hope of Israel. You know and cherish the stories about God and Israel as told in the Hebrew Scriptures. Long ago, Israel had a king . . . but no more. Long ago, God himself had dwelt with his people . . . but no more. Long ago, God’s promises had seemed so certain and so near . . . but no more. Though your ancestors had returned home after being exiled by the Babylonians, you know that the exile never really ended. For more than 500 years, your people have endured one oppressor after another. The sins of Israel have not been forgiven. God’s promises have not been kept. Deep in your heart, you know that you and all Israel are captive still.

So you hope and wait and look, perhaps not so patiently, for God’s anointed one, the returning king, the Messiah who would usher in God’s kingdom. On that day, the day of the Lord, the sins of Israel would be forgiven and the exile would be ended. Once again, God would be with you and all his people as in the days of old.

And then, literally out of nowhere, an angel of the Lord comes to you and tells you the most astonishing thing. The day you and all your kinsmen have awaited for centuries is

upon you, in the person of a yet-to-be-born baby, who rests even then in the womb of your young fiancé.

“Conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary”

These two phrases are taken from the Apostles Creed that we say each week during worship. They are best seen as two sides of a single coin – and that coin is Jesus. These two statements are claims that Jesus is divine (“conceived by the Holy Spirit”) and human (“born of the Virgin Mary”). Truly God and truly human.

These claims proved to be some of the most contentious among Christians in the first centuries after Jesus’ death and resurrection. Some claimed that Jesus was the person closest to God, even the most God-like, but not really and truly God. Others claimed that he only appeared to be human, but wasn’t really, truly human like you and me.

These controversies raged across the Christian communities in the early centuries and gave rise to the great creeds, for such questions lie at the heart of our beliefs about the Trinitarian nature of God. If Jesus is truly God, then aren’t there two Gods, but then again, aren’t we monotheistic – and so on. You can imagine the late night discussions and mental headaches that arose from such questions.

The great Christian confessions, including the UMC statement of faith, uphold two inseparable natures, divine & human, in one person, Jesus – sort of two “whats” and one “who.”<sup>1</sup> How can this be? Trying too hard to answer that question has led inevitably to distortions of Jesus and of the Gospel.

The great cloud of witnesses to the Good News urges us to stay true to the full revelation of Scripture and avoid some understandable mistakes: don’t deny the full and true divinity and humanity of Jesus; don’t divide him into two persons; don’t make him into some hybrid “God-man.” Instead, embrace and proclaim the Jesus-Who-Is, not a Jesus of our own making, even if we can’t penetrate all the mysteries of God.

<sup>1</sup>Using “what/nature” and “who/person,” Jesus is two “whats” (two natures, human and divine) and one “who” (Jesus). We can speak of the Trinity as one “what” (a single divine nature) and three “whos” (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).

*Joseph’s story*

Nazareth was a Galilean village nestled in the hills north and west of the Sea of Galilee. It was not large in population, but neither was it a small circle of grass huts. Such villages are known to have had some industry that produced goods in excess of the village’s needs. And there were often people of means in these villages, as terraced homes have been found on some of the hillsides. But still, Nazareth was a quiet place and Joseph, probably a carpenter, lived a typically rural life broken up by time spent in the city of Sepphoris just four miles away.

Joseph had become engaged to a young woman in the village. Joseph’s betrothing to Mary was seriously undertaken and could be broken only in the most extreme of circumstances. In first-century Judaism, engaged couples were treated as husband and wife; unfaithfulness to the fiancé would be considered adultery and draw all the appropriate penalties under the Jewish law.

And now, Mary was pregnant. There could be only one explanation. Mary had cheated on Joseph and brought great shame on him and his family. The punishment for adultery even extended to stoning (Deuteronomy 22:23-27), though by the first-century the rabbis had lessened the penalty. Nonetheless, the punishments meted out were severe and humiliating. This is what lay ahead for the teenaged girl.

And Joseph, the wronged fiancé, is a “righteous” (*diakos*) man (v. 19), which means that he lives by the law of Moses. He knows what punishments lay ahead of Mary. There would be every reason to expect that he would

demand the full weight of the law and the community fall on this adulterer.

But Joseph makes no such demands. Instead, he makes plans to “dismiss her quietly,” to send her away from the shame and humiliation. In a word, Joseph extends mercy to

the girl. This would not be in keeping with the letter of the law, but it would be in keeping with the heart of the law.

But in just a moment everything changed. A messenger from God arrives to tell Joseph that Mary has been faithful to Joseph. The child she carries in her womb was “conceived by the Holy Spirit.” The child is a boy and is to be named Yeshua, which means “God saves,” (the name is “Joshua,” or “*Iesous*” in the Greek, which is then brought into English as “Jesus”). This baby will be the long-awaited Savior of Israel, and hence, of the whole world. This baby will save the people from their sins (v. 21), restoring them to a right relationship with God in fulfillment of the prophets (v. 22-23).

In his commentary on Matthew, Eugene Boring helps us to see that in this story of Joseph, Matthew points us to the new and higher righteousness of the kingdom (Matthew 5:20). Not a righteousness and justice built on rules-following, but justice grounded in the heart. We, I suspect, have little sense that Joseph’s staying with Mary and becoming a father to this baby is a supreme act of love.

Because this child would grow up to be the Christ, inaugurating the arrival of God’s kingdom, Christmas can still change the world. Jesus would form a new people, who would be empowered by the very Spirit of God to build for his kingdom, to prepare the world for God’s work, to seek heart-shaped justice and mercy for all. We are those people, this Christmas and every Christmas to come. What will you change?

#### “A woman is with child and shall bear a son”

Our Scripture passage from the book of Isaiah (7:10-16) is set in 734 BC. The people of God have lived in divided kingdoms for nearly 200 years, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Now, the great Assyrian empire is poised on the northern borders of Israel. The king of Israel has entered into a defensive alliance with Syria to its north and seeks a similar alliance with Judah. Ahaz, the king of Judah, doesn’t know whether to be more fearful of his neighbors or the Assyrians. When Ahaz refuses to cooperate in this defensive pact, his neighbors arrive at the border, ready to install a new king of their own who will join their alliance.

At this critical time, Isaiah, God’s prophet, comes to meet Ahaz. Isaiah carries word of a promise from God. Ahaz is to forget these national alliances and trust God for deliverance from the Assyrians. Isaiah even goes so far as to tell King Ahaz that he can test God if he doesn’t believe these promises. But Ahaz refuses it all. He chooses the political path, rejects the promises of God, and seeks an alliance with the Assyrians. But Isaiah warns Ahaz that Assyria will prove to be Judah’s undoing (Isaiah 7:17).

Though the darkness will collapse upon Israel in a few years and upon Judah in about 150 years, God promises that a faithful remnant will endure. Judah itself (the “young woman” of v. 14) will give birth to this faithful remnant (the “son”),<sup>1</sup> culminating in the birth of Jesus, Emmanuel, who will be the faithful remnant of one, the righteous Jew who is able to keep the covenant by loving God and loving neighbor every day and in every way.

Barry Webb’s commentary on Isaiah in *The Bible Speaks Today* (IVP, 1996) series helped me to see how the words of Isaiah could have both (1) made sense to King Ahaz and (2) point us to Christ, as seen by Matthew when he wrote his gospel and quoted from this passage in Isaiah (1:23). Emmanuel (or Immanuel) means simply “God-with-us.” Thus when Isaiah tells Ahaz that Judah ( the woman) will bear a faithful son, the remnant who will stay true to God, that remnant will truly be “God-with-us.” Of course, Jesus will be Emmanuel in a new way, “God-with-us” as God incarnate. When Matthew quoted this Emmanuel passage he used the Septuagint’s Greek translation of the Hebrew, in which “young woman” is rendered “*virgin/parthenos*.”

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What if Jesus had not been born? Where would we be in the biblical story? Try to imagine the course of human history if there had been no Jesus.
2. In what ways do you see Christmas, and, hence, the Christ, changing the world? What would you say to someone who told that if Christmas were really a true story, the world would have more to show for it?
3. It is always tempting for us to reduce religion to rules-keeping; it just makes everything so much simpler. There are times when the “Christian thing to do” conflicts with the letter of the Bible. Do you agree? If so, how do we go about figuring out what actually is the Christian thing to do?

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<b>Monday, Matthew 1:1-17</b> What do you think is the point of this genealogy?	<b>Tuesday, Matthew 1:18-25</b> Where does story fit in the larger story? Why do you think it focuses on Joseph?
<b>Wednesday, Matthew 2:1-12</b> Jewish opposition to the baby and Gentile worship.	<b>Thursday, Matthew 2:13-23</b> Exile in Egypt and the return to Nazareth.
<b>Friday, Matthew 3:1-12</b> The arrival of John the baptizer	<b>Weekly Joys and Concerns</b>

### Scott's 11:00 Sunday class in Festival Hall

#### *Christmas at the Movies!*

We are looking at favorite Christmas movies through the lens of Scripture.

Dec 19 – The Nativity Story (2006)

Dec 26 – Scrooged

=====

#### Coming in January

##### **Scott's 11:00 Sunday class**

*Good News for Anxious Christians:*

*Ten practical things you don't have to do to be close to God*

##### **Scott's Monday Evening Bible Academy Class starting Jan. 24**

*Did Paul Really Hate Women?*

Did Paul really teach that women aren't supposed to teach men? That they aren't to preach? That they are to cover their heads, take off their jewelry, and keep silent in church? That wives are to “submit” to their husbands? There are few NT passages that are more controversial than Paul's teachings about the role of women in church and in marriage. In this seven-week class, we'll examine women in the world of the earliest Christians and take a careful look at each of the key passages in Paul's letters, all while upholding the inspiration and authority of Scripture.

##### **Tuesday Lunchtime Class (beginning Jan. 18)**

*In God's Time: The Bible and the Future*