

There Is Hope In The Red Letters

Long Beach Alliance Church • December 16th, 2006 • Pastor Chris Lankford

**THEREFORE THE LORD HIMSELF WILL
GIVE YOU A SIGN: BEHOLD, A VIRGIN WILL
BE WITH CHILD AND BEAR A SON, AND
SHE WILL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL.**

~ISAIAH 7:14 (NASB)

**BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE
WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR
A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL
HIS NAME **IMMANUEL**, WHICH
TRANSLATED MEANS,
“**GOD WITH US.**”**

~MATTHEW 1:23 (NASB)

1) The Ancient Promise Of Messiah

- A) From the beginning, mankind's only hope for a future is God's promise of a Messiah who would save the world (Genesis 3:15) and be a blessing to all of mankind (12:1-3, 17:1-8).
- B) God's initiation of this promise would be revealed when a "virgin maiden" (*see excursus) would have a son whose name would be "God with us" (Immanuel ~ Isaiah 7:14).

- C) The virgin birth of the Messiah (Matthew 1:18, 24-25; Luke 1:26-35) would occur in the “little town of Bethlehem” (Micah 5:2, cf. Matthew 2:1, John 7:42).
- D) Bethlehem, where King David’s family was from, was the town of the royal-line (1st Samuel 17:12). Jesus was to be of the house of David (Jeremiah 23:5, Luke 3:23-38).
- E) Further, Jesus was to be of the line of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob & Judah (Genesis 22:18, 21:12, 35:10-12, 49:10; Numbers 24:17, Micah 5:2) which were all fulfilled in Christ (Matthew 1:1-16; Luke 3:23-38).

2) The Kingly Line Of The Messiah

- A) The beginning of the genealogy† of Jesus Christ emphasizes the line of promise which ran from Abraham, through David, and eventually to Jesus (Matthew 1:1).
- B) Being a “son of David” was a title for being a messianic deliverer in Israel, and was in accordance with the Davidic Covenant (2nd Samuel 7:4-17) which prophesied about the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

† When reading biblical genealogies, we must not expect accuracy by our modern standards. Omissions, variant spellings, and even variant names (i.e., some persons with two names) may be expected in genealogies, with many of these alterations motivated theologically. But to admit the theological interest in and impact upon these genealogies need not lead to the conclusion that they are not in any sense meant to be taken as factual. Both Matthew and Luke are concerned to represent the facts contained in their sources; they are hardly creating lists out of thin air. These genealogies, like much of the content of the Gospels, are to be taken as interpreted history — i.e., factual and not fictional data, conceived and set forth with theological goals, these in turn informed by the eschatological fullness now inescapably present to these writers. Summarized from *Matthew 1-13*, by Donald A. Hagner, pg. 8-9, from *The Word Biblical Commentary Series, Volume 33a*.

- C) Jesus' genealogy reveals both his royal lineage and it gives a foreshadowing of what Jesus is "made of." Jesus' lineage has profound theological implications!

3) The Disenfranchised Line Of The Messiah

- A) It is notable that the line of Jesus runs through several "scandalous" or "disenfranchised" ancestors:
 - i) Isaac was the younger child to Ishmael (the line usually ran through the eldest child).
 - ii) Jacob was a liar and stole the birthright (inheritance) of his older brother Esau.
 - iii) Judah is part of the Messianic line, rather than Joseph, a much more extraordinary son of Jacob.
 - iv) Tamar was a Canaanite woman who disguised herself as a prostitute to seduce her father-in-law, Judah, into sleeping with her so she could have a son.
 - v) Rahab was an actual prostitute, and a Canaanite.
 - vi) Ruth was a Moabite woman, an outsider to Israel.
 - vii) David (the king) was a liar, an adulterer with Bathsheba (next on list), and a murderer of Uriah, one of David's mighty men and faithful husband to Bathsheba.
 - viii) Mary (the fifth woman mentioned) also was experiencing an unprecedented and unconventional pregnancy, although only scandalous in its appearance.
 - ix) The next section of names marks a great period of decline in Israel during the divided kingdom. This leads to the Babylonian captivity and exile.
 - x) The names in the final section are unknowns, people who were of Jesus' ancestry but of little individual significance.

4) The Genealogy Which Lives On

- A) The genealogical list which begins the book of Matthew establishes Jesus as both from the kingly line of Israel and as a son of scandal and obscurity (Matthew 1:1-17).

- B) In some capacity, Jesus lineage foreshadows His ministry. The exact kind of people from whom he came, are the exact kind of people with whom He came to minister (cf. Matthew 11:5).

- C) Further, note that Jesus' genealogy includes both Israelites and Gentiles (non-Jews). This foreshadows a Messiah which would be a blessing to the "whole world," not just the nation of Israel (Ephesians 2:10-16; cf. John 12:20ff).

- D) Note that Jesus' genealogy includes women, which established a value for women in the plans of God which was heightened by the purity and faithfulness of Mary, Jesus Christ's mother (Matthew 1:18ff).

- E) What then do we observe in the genealogy of Jesus Christ? We see God's hand has been in control and at work, even in the worst of situations, from the beginning, to work out salvation and provide for our future (cf. Philippians 2:12-13).

- F) This is the beginning of the "Jesus story" in Matthew's gospel, but it is certainly not the end of the story! Jesus' life and ministry brought hope to the whole world! As Matthew closes his gospel, the invitation to become part of the family of God (part of the genealogy) is extended to "all nations" (Matthew 28:18-20).

*Excursus on the Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ

The Hebrew word which is translated "virgin" or "young maiden" (al-mah/אַלְמָה) is more ambiguous than the clearer and completely unambiguous word for "virgin" (bethula/בֵּתּוּלָה) in Hebrew. This has led some to conclude that translators have inappropriately inserted the word "virgin" (*isogenesis*, reading something "into" the text) in the Isaiah 7:14 passage, rather than simply leaving the word as "maiden," as Isaiah intended.

Many secular voices reject Jesus' virgin birth. Surprisingly, these secular voices have been joined by some Christians, even resulting in conjecture as to whether the Scriptures need to be literally accurate. In his book "*Velvet Elvis*," Popular speaker and pastor Rob Bell writes this disturbing conjecture...

"What if tomorrow someone digs up definitive proof that Jesus had a real, earthly, biological father named Larry, and archaeologists find Larry's tomb and do DNA samples and prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the virgin birth was really just a bit of mythologizing the Gospel writers threw in to appeal to the followers of the Mithra and Dionysian religious cults that were hugely popular at the time of Jesus, whose gods had virgin births? But what if as you study the origin of the word "virgin," you discover that the word "virgin" in the gospel of Matthew actually comes from the book of Isaiah, and then you find out that in the Hebrew language at that time, the word "virgin" could mean several things. And what if you discover that in the first century being "born of a virgin" also referred to a child whose mother became pregnant the first time she had intercourse? Could a person believe all of this and still love God? Could a person still be a Christian? Or does our belief all just fall apart?" (Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, pg. 26).

What can be said to compelling secular and Christian voices who see the "virgin" birth as mythology and see those who believe in the virgin birth as "faithfully misdirected?"

I would add the following to the conversation... The word in question (al-mah/אַלְמָה) is never used of a married woman in the Old Testament. Rather, the word itself carries with it the clear idea that the woman was unmarried, and thus, was a virgin. The two ideas are inseparable in the biblical mind-set. Our Western mind-set "reads into" (*isogenesis*) our own cultural values (that one need not be a virgin in order to be a young maiden) to the words of Isaiah. However, this would be an enormous cultural mistake. The fact is, the Isaiah passage is left ambiguous because the focus of the passage is not on the virgin birth, but rather military kings with whom Ahaz was to be focused (cf. Isaiah 7:10-16). As is true whenever we translate and interpret Scripture, the context of the passage is our number one guide, not word usage.

All of this to say, I affirm the usage of "virgin" in Isaiah 7:14 for both contextual and cultural reasons. The promise of "God with us" would come from a virgin birth, a dual miracle which would be unmistakable in its fulfillment. That Mary was the "virgin" of Isaiah (Matthew 1:18, 24-25; Luke 1:26-35) is abundantly clear. The fulfilled prophecy further clarifies that Jesus Christ's prophesied birth affirms He is 'God with us!'

Summarized from various sources already noted. I am especially indebted to *The Book of Isaiah, 1-39*, by John N. Oswalt, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (NICOT), pages 209-211.

Engaging Advent

The word “Advent” comes from the Latin *adventus*, which means “the approach” or “the arrival.” The Latin verb is *advenio*: “I arrive. I come. I am coming.”

For centuries, followers of Jesus Christ have observed this season with a passionate anticipation of Christmas morning, marking the joy of the birth of God in the flesh, Jesus Christ.

Despite its significance, our culture has largely captured this season and disguised it with Lord’s-a-Leaping, Sleigh Bells Ringing, and a Jolly Old Elf.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with any of these special traditions... Unless we miss Jesus Christ in the midst of all the tinsel and trappings.

If we miss Jesus Christ, then we have missed Christmas, and we have missed the message of “Peace on Earth, and goodwill toward men...”

Will this year be any different?

Simply, you are invited to engage Advent, perhaps for the first time in your life.

Through this season, which encompasses the four Sundays which lead up to Christmas, there will be special Advent Scripture readings which you (and your family) are invited to read during the week. There will also be some readings from Christian writers who have contemplated Advent over the centuries.

Will you schedule a time each day to anticipate His coming? Will you engage Advent? Join with the shepherds, walk with kings from the East, sit with Herod as he hears of the Christ child, exult with Mary & Joseph, gaze on the star of Bethlehem all over again, as though this is the first time...

Advent Scripture Reading

As the prophets searched for the coming of the Messiah, will you also take time to look forward to the Messiah's coming this week? Seek His great Kingdom and recognize what it will look like through the eyes of the prophets.

- Read 1st Peter 1:10-12
- Read Isaiah 9:2-7; 35:1-10

The prophecies about the Messiah are miraculously fulfilled in Jesus Christ! Take a look at the enclosed chart on prophecy and read the prophecies and fulfillments of the following prophecies from the chart.

- Read Prophecies 1-12

There were many prophecies of Christ's birth, but there were also many about his suffering and death for His people's sins (intercession). Take some time to meditate on such a great God as the one who would suffer for people like us.

- Read Isaiah 53:1-12

The prophecies about the Messiah are also about a future King and His Kingdom which have not yet happened. Like the prophets of old, we wait, we look, we expect an arrival. Of what? Read of God's great future for us!

- Read Isaiah 60:1-22

Advent Reading #2 ~ William Willimon

William Willimon is author of more than fifty books. He is a tremendously popular preacher, and is consistently listed as one of the best preachers in the English speaking world. Dr. Willimon is a bishop in the United Methodist Church serving in Alabama. He was formerly the Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, and is also a graduate of Yale Divinity School.

The God We Hardly Knew

No one can celebrate a genuine Christmas without being truly poor. The self-sufficient, the proud, those who, because they have everything, look down on others, those who have no need even of God – for them there will be no Christmas. Only the poor, the hungry, those who need someone to come on their behalf, will have that someone. That someone is God. Emmanuel. God-with-us. Without poverty of spirit there can be no abundance of God.

~Oscar Romero

PROBABLY MOST OF US have had the experience of receiving, right out of the blue, a gift from someone we really don't know all that well. And perhaps, to our consternation, the gift turns out to be nice, something that we didn't know we wanted and certainly didn't ask for, but there it is, a good gift from someone who is not really a good friend. Now, what is the first thing we do in response?

Right. We try to come up with a gift to give in return – not out of gratitude (after all we didn't ask for it) or out of friendship (after all we hardly knew this person), but because we don't want to feel guilty.

We don't want to be indebted. The gift seems to lay a claim upon us, especially since it has come from someone we barely know. This is uncomfortable; it's hard to look the person in the face until we have reciprocated. By giving us a gift, this person has power over us.

It may well be, as Jesus says, more blessed to give than to receive. But it is more difficult to receive. Watch how people blush when given a compliment. Watch what you do when your teen-aged son comes home with a very expensive Christmas present from a girl he has dated only twice. "Now you take that expensive sweater right back

and tell her that your parents won't allow you to accept it. Every gift comes with a claim and you're not ready for her claim upon you." In a society that makes strangers of us all, it is interesting what we do when a stranger gives us a gift.

And consider what we do at Christmas, the so-called season of giving. We enjoy thinking of ourselves as basically generous, benevolent, giving people. That's one reason why everyone, even the nominally religious, loves Christmas. Christmas is a season to celebrate our alleged generosity. The newspaper keeps us posted on how many needy families we have adopted. The Salvation Army kettles enable us to be generous while buying groceries (for ourselves) or gifts (for our families). People we work with who usually balk at the collection to pay for the morning coffee fall over themselves soliciting funds "to make Christmas" for some family.

We love Christmas because, as we say, Christmas brings out the best in us. Everyone gives on Christmas, even the stingiest among us, even the Ebenezer Scrooges. Charles Dickens' story of Scrooge's transformation has probably done more to form our notions of Christmas than St. Luke's story of the manger. Whereas Luke tells us of God's gift to us, Dickens tells us how we can give to others. A Christmas Carol is more congenial to our favorite images of ourselves. Dickens suggests that down deep, even the worst of us can become generous, giving people.

Yet I suggest we are better givers than getters, not because we are generous people but because we are proud, arrogant people. The Christmas story – the one according to Luke not Dickens – is not about how blessed it is to be givers but about how essential it is to see ourselves as receivers.

We prefer to think of ourselves as givers – powerful, competent, self-sufficient, capable people whose goodness motivates us to employ some of our power, competence and gifts to benefit the less fortunate. Which is a direct contradiction of the biblical account of the first Christmas. There we are portrayed not as the givers we wish we were but as the receivers we are. Luke and Matthew go to great lengths to demonstrate that we – with our power, generosity, competence and capabilities – had little to do with God's work in Jesus. God wanted

to do something for us so strange, so utterly beyond the bounds of human imagination, so foreign to human projection, that God had to resort to angels, pregnant virgins, and stars in the sky to get it done. We didn't think of it, understand it or approve it. All we could do, at Bethlehem, was receive it. A gift from a God we hardly even knew.

This theme struck me forcefully a few years ago while counseling someone from my church. It was December. She was telling me about her worry and confusion over a number of problems. Having taken several counseling courses in seminary, I knew how to be a good counselor. That is, I knew to keep quiet, listen patiently, ask questions, and offer no direct guidance. After I had given her ample opportunity to vent her feelings, I remarked as I had been taught: "I believe that you have the solution to your problems within you. I believe that down deep, you know what your real problem is and that you have the resources to handle it."

You have heard the message before. One certainly does not have to come to church to hear this popular gospel: You have, within you, the solution to what ails you.

And then it hit me. It was the middle of December, late in Advent. In less than two weeks I would be standing in front of the congregation reading the nativity story from one of the Gospels, demonstrating through a strange story of a virgin birth to a peasant couple in Judea that the solution to what ails us has very little to do with us. After having tried for generations to cure what ails us, God reached for something inconceivable. God put on our back doorstep a solution so radical that many missed it.

Rabbi Michael Goldberg, in his book *Jews and Christians*, says that as a Jew he is impressed in reading Matthew's account of the nativity by how utterly passive the actors are. As a Jew, he answers to the story of the Exodus, a story of how God liberated the chosen people through the enlistment and prodding of people like Moses, Aaron and Miriam. But the Christmas story implies that what God wants to do for us is so strange, so beyond the bounds of human effort and striving, that God must resort to utterly unnatural, supernatural means. It tells of an unimaginable gift from a stranger, a God whom we hardly even knew.

This strange story tells us how to be receivers. The first word of the church, a people born out of so odd a nativity, is that we are receivers before we are givers. Discipleship teaches us the art of seeing our lives as gifts. That's tough, because I would rather see myself as a giver. I want power – to stand on my own, take charge, set things to rights, perhaps to help those who have nothing. I don't like picturing myself as dependent, needy, empty-handed.

Working with students at a university, I've decided that this truth is a major reason why many children come to despise their parents. It's humbling to see one's life, talents, capabilities, values, weaknesses and strengths as gifts from one's parents. We would rather be self-made men and women, standing on our own feet, striding bravely into a new world of our creation. It's humbling to look into a mirror at twenty-one and admit, "My God, I look just like my old man."

I suspect that the difficulty of receiving is a factor in marriage, too. It's painful to be thrust into such close proximity to another human being, day after day, year after year, until one gradually comes to see that one's identity and character are due to an alarming degree, to what one has received from one's spouse. Marriage is an everyday experience of living in the red – debtors to someone whom we have just begun to know.

If one asks the Gift Records Office of my school who are our most antagonistic alumni, they'll tell you they are the ones who were here on full scholarship. We talk a great deal about "right to life," "freedom of choice" and "self-determination," but not too much about indebtedness.

It's tough to be on the receiving end of love, God's or anybody else's. It requires that we see our lives not as our possessions, but as gifts. "Nothing is more repugnant to capable, reasonable people than grace," wrote John Wesley a long time ago.

Among the most familiar Christmas texts is the one in Isaiah: "The Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel" (Isaiah 7:14). Less familiar is its context: Isaiah has been pleading with

King Ahaz to put his trust in God's promise to Israel rather than in alliances with strong military powers like Syria. "If you will not believe, you shall not be established," Isaiah warns Ahaz (7:9). Then the prophet tells the fearful king that God is going to give him a baby as a sign. A baby. Isn't that just like God, Ahaz must have thought. What Ahaz needed, with Assyria breathing down his neck, was a good army, not a baby.

This is often the way God loves us: with gifts we thought we didn't need, which transform us into people we don't necessarily want to be. With our advanced degrees, armies, government programs, material comforts and self-fulfillment techniques, we assume that religion is about giving a little of our power in order to confirm to ourselves that we are indeed as self-sufficient as we claim.

Then this stranger comes to us, blesses us with a gift, and calls us to see ourselves as we are – empty-handed recipients of a gracious God who, rather than leave us to our own devices, gave us a baby.

Advent Notes

Advent Notes