

Immanuel

Isaiah 7:1-14

If you asked me who has had the most impact upon my mind in terms of understanding the Bible, it would be easy for me to tell you. He would be easy to identify. Some of you would know his name. He was one of my seminary professors, and it was he who was most used by God to shape the theological process within my mind as I came to know and understand the whole of Scripture much more effectively during those years of intense study that were so valuable for my training in ministry. It was he whom I would recognize and honor as having the most clear and insightful understanding of the Bible among all those teachers whom I have had the privilege of having. His explanation of biblical texts was profound and penetrating, never merely academic or theoretical.

In many ways, he was the best teacher I have ever had. In many ways, he was also the most demanding and difficult teacher I have ever had. It wasn't enough just to memorize the lecture notes or learn what was taught to us. He would tell us that he never gave A's to his students unless, as he put it, they were able to teach him something. So the A- I finally squeaked out of him in the last course I took with him was of great satisfaction. And the grade really became less important than the ability to learn the Scriptures. I know that was his goal, and he succeeded.

This particular professor had the ability to summarize and encapsulate the teaching of Scripture in ways that were very, very useful. And memorable. One example relates to our text this afternoon, as I remember one lesson in which he identified the key theme of the whole of the Old Testament revelation God has given us. One central, overall theme that captures the whole essence of what God has progressively revealed from the

beginning to the end of the Old Testament. That climactic theme is simple to express and equally easy to understand. It is defined by the words, "God with us."

That is the central promise of the Old Testament, the central prophecy of the Old Testament, and the central theme of the whole Bible. God with us. As you go from beginning to end of the Old Testament, you see the progressive unfolding of that theme, God with us. But most of all, when you move from the Old Testament to the New, you see how the promise of the Old Testament becomes the reality of the New Testament. "God with us" is the prophetic anticipation of every chapter, every word of the Old Testament. And the whole of the New Testament is given as an exposition and explanation of the fulfillment of that promise. God with us.

You know the Hebrew word for this promise, God with us. You really should keep a list of all those Hebrew and Greek words that you know. The length of that list would probably surprise you. Surely here is one of the words on that list. The English, "God with us." The Hebrew, Immanuel.

I could break it down a little bit. The ending, "el," pronounced "L", is God's name. Sometimes more fully elohim, but often just the abbreviated "el." The beginning of the word is the English preposition "with," the "Im..." in Immanuel. So "Imman" means "with us," and "Immanuel," is translated, "With us, God!" What an absolutely glorious and astounding thought! And that is the message of the whole Bible, in its most concise form.

And the transition from the Old Testament to the New is the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the event in human history when it could rightly be said that God lived and dwelt with men. We read of that incarnation in the theological language of John's gospel,

John 1:1 “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men...14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

According to John, the word of God is nothing less than the second person of the trinity, the eternal word through whom all things were made. And the word became flesh. God became flesh. God, the eternal God, took a human nature. The word was made man. That is the theological description. In our text this afternoon, we have the prophetic announcement of an event that would come about 750 years later.

v.14

This is actually a very difficult text to preach on, simply because it is so familiar. It is so much a part of what we often call the Christmas story. The birth of Jesus. Everyone knows it, at least in this country. And all of you are very, very familiar with it. So my challenge is to make it mean something more than just the Christmas story. Something more than an important part our comfortable and familiar Christmas traditions. Indeed, this is a prophecy of one of the greatest miraculous acts of God ever performed. God became man.

I. THE PROPHECY OF A MIRACLE.

v.14

Something absolutely obvious is being declared, isn't it? Something that had never happened. Something that could never happen, humanly speaking. And it will never happen again. A woman became pregnant, that's normal enough, but the begetting

was done not by a male human being, but by the immediate power of the Holy Spirit. There was no male contribution to this conception. There was no male participation. A woman became pregnant and would bear a child without a man. Such is the power of the holy spirit. And such is,

A. The miracle of the virgin birth.

In the current political and cultural debates, there is a lot of talk about what is so consistently called the freedom of choice, referring to the choice granted by the law in our country for a woman to have the choice whether or not to permit an unborn child within her womb to live. She is given the choice to end that life which grows within her own body, under the guise of the right to control her own body. And according to the popular attitude of our day, no one should have the right to tell her what to do with her own body.

But the whole point of a pregnancy is that there is no longer one body, but two. Two people, two souls, two human beings created in the image of God. And it is no secret that that second person, that tiny person developing inside of a woman, began with the genetic union of a sperm and an egg. Simple, basic high school biology.

But what happened on this one occasion was a virgin birth. More accurately, a virgin conception. A woman, before she had ever come together to be with a man, a woman conceived in her womb a new and separate person.

Now, don't miss the explicit language in which the moral purity of this woman is declared and defined. There is no misunderstanding. This was a miracle. A supernatural act of God in which he brought about something by his own power that cannot be explained by natural causes. There is no possible

natural, ordinary explanation. Matthew's gospel describes the scene so personally.

Mat. 1:18 "Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. 19 Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. 20 But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit."

There is also much to say here in praise of Joseph. He drew the only conclusion a man could possibly draw, that his fiancé had been unfaithful to him and had engaged in an immoral relationship with another man. After all, there was no other way to explain her pregnancy. But even so, he would treat her kindly, "unwilling to put her to shame." He would divorce her quietly, ending the engagement or betrothal without any further insult to this woman he had prepared to marry. He wouldn't pursue the public lawsuit that would potentially subject her to the punishment of stoning. He wouldn't pursue that legal avenue that would bring her, at best, public scorn and shame. But in his own principles of honor, he could not enter into marriage vows with her.

All of that personal description serves to highlight the miraculous nature of Mary's conception. Joseph was not the human or biological father to this child. Mary, of course, knew the full explanation and had demonstrated her own godliness in response to the Angel Gabriel's announcement,

Luke 1:30 And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the

Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34 And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" 35 And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. 36 And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her."

Such a godly young woman. Such a praiseworthy response. "I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." Such a commitment and an attitude worthy of our imitation. Don't miss that in all of this. The story is familiar to us, but it wasn't familiar to Mary! This was her body, as we would say today. And there was nothing in her that would respond with the foolish and selfish declarations of today, that nobody could tell her what she could or couldn't do with her body. No, for Mary, this child was a child. And as absolutely impossible it must have been to comprehend fully what the angel told her, she simply said, "Let it be to me according to your word."

Joseph, for his part, responded in a similar way to the angelic message he received.

Mat. 1:24 "Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, 25 and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name Jesus."

Again, let me emphasize that all of those personal reactions are given to highlight the obvious reality of the miracle that had

taken place. The supernatural event by the a godly, virtuous young woman became pregnant and conceived a child in her own womb by the power of the Holy Spirit at work. And I don't need to emphasize how thoroughly this notion of a virgin birth is rejected and denied by both unbelievers and many professed believers alike, those we would identify with liberalism.

But liberalism is not Christianity, and our presbyterian forefathers were right to include this miracle of the virgin birth within the narrow list of fundamentals of the Christian faith, because if you deny this miracle, you deny the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. You deny the doctrine of the God-man, and you are left with a purely human Jesus, a man unqualified and unable to satisfy the justice of God which our sins deserve. In other words, without the virgin birth, there is no savior. There is no forgiveness of sin, no mediator between God and man.

So I will declare to you what the Bible teaches: "Christ, the Son of God, became man, by taking to himself a true body and a reasonable soul, being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost in the womb of the virgin Mary, and born of her, yet without sin."

More fully from our Confession of Faith, "The Son of God, the second person in the Trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance and equal with the Father, did, when the fullness of time was come, take upon him man's nature, with all the essential properties, and common infirmities thereof, yet without sin; being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost, in the womb of the virgin Mary, of her substance. So that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion. Which person is very God, and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man."

You see, the miracle is not simply that a woman became pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit, but that God became flesh.

B. The miracle of the incarnation of God.

God became flesh. The second person of the trinity took upon himself man's nature. It was a real human nature. He was a real man. Fully man, and that manhood was inseparably joined to his Godhead. God dwelt among us. The word became flesh. That which was conceived in the woman is from the Holy Spirit. The unborn child in the womb of Mary is the incarnation of God.

Too often, perhaps, we miss that emphasis and focus only the process of the virgin birth. But the purpose for that process was to produce the intended result. The emphasis here is not upon the pregnancy of Mary, but upon that the child who was conceived. He was God in the flesh.

Let me hesitate for a moment here and make a very important application. For all of the good and necessary theological reasons why Jesus had to be both God and man, let me emphasize a personal and pastoral reason. I have good reason to emphasize this application because the book of Hebrews does. Turn with me to,

Heb. 2:14 "Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. 16 For indeed He does not give aid to angels, but He does give aid to the seed of Abraham. 17 Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the

people. 18 For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted.”

You see, beloved, he was a man. A man in every way like us. Without sin, to be sure, but tempted in his humanity. And because he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. In other words, you and me. He had to be made like us so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest. And so he is.

The miracle of the incarnation of God is such that you and I have help in our struggle against sin. The miracle of the incarnation of God is such that you and I have the forgiveness of sins because he gave himself for our sins. Because of the miracle of the incarnation of God, we have help and we have hope.

And, in the incarnate Jesus, God dwells among us and we, therefore, see his glory, full of grace and truth. We see the glory of God, for we have seen Jesus. The miracle of the incarnation of God. The word became flesh and dwelt among us. Indeed, that is the central message, the central theme of the whole Bible! God with us!

Let’s step back a little now, and look at the whole passage, the context for this great prophecy of such a great miracle. There is a historical context, that adds to our understanding of God and his grace to give us this promise of Immanuel. We see the great contrast between,

II. THE STUBBORNNESS OF MEN AND THE GRACE OF GOD.

A. Stubborn men refuse to receive the word of God.

Let’s go back to the historical context.
v.1-2

Trouble was certainly at hand! Even the king was afraid. And the Lord had a message for the wicked king of Judah, telling him of impending disaster.

v.3-6

But the Lord will still accomplish his purpose,
v.7-9

Actually, that’s a very positive and encouraging prophecy for the nation of Judah. And the Lord uses the occasion to cause Ahaz to recognize him, to acknowledge him. For Ahaz was a stubborn and proud king, reliant upon himself and not upon the Lord or anyone else. So the Lord says,

v.10-11

But Ahaz simply wouldn’t do it. Too proud. Too self-reliant! Too unwilling to recognize the honor and glory of God, and he couches he pride in what seems to be a spiritual response.

v.12

I hate it when people do that. Rebel against the Lord in their own stubbornness, and use spiritual or biblical words to make themselves appear godly. But Ahaz wasn’t godly at all. He was rejecting a revelation of the Lord! And the Lord responds appropriately,

v.13

Then follows, the familiar verse,
v.14

The point is that,

B. God makes known his grace despite the stubbornness of men.

And that, of course, just magnifies his grace. He will give a sign, a miraculous sign. A sign unlike any sign ever given. So this is how God will prove the truth and the reliability of his prophecy. There will be a son, born to a virgin. But not any son. God himself will become a man.

And in that context of God's incredible grace, entering himself into the actual human history of mankind, in that very context, the nation of Judah will be judged for their unbelief.

v.15-17

Judgement upon Judah. Judgement upon Israel. The covenant people of God rejected their God. But all of this comes back to that most central thought, that God would determine to live among his people, that he would dwell among them. That God would become man. In the flesh. And so he did!

There is so much emphasis in our culture upon this Christmas holiday, and most of it misses the point altogether. So much of the emphasis is upon our own Christmas traditions. Upon feasting, and gift-giving, cards and parties. But this is what we must always celebrate, God is with us.

John 1:14 "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."