

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Fourth Sunday of Advent – Year A

RCL Readings – Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

ACNA Readings – Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 24; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

Introduction. The season of Advent has a rhythm to it. In the anticipation and build up to Christmas, the first Sunday looks at the future coming of the Messiah. In the second and third weeks, we hear from John the Baptist, and the fourth Sunday is dedicated to talking about Mary the mother of Jesus. Protestants are usually unsure of what to do with Mary. On one hand there is the rejection of idolizing her and talking about her too much, a reaction to Catholic Marianism. On the other hand, we Protestants don't talk about her at all. Yet every Protestant is still going to have Luke 1:48 in their Bibles which reads, "All generations will call me blessed." The challenge then is how do you do that? How do you call Mary blessed in every generation?

Common Theme. Our readings this week revolve around the prophesied baby that will come from Mary. Isaiah will prophesy the baby's miraculous birth; the Psalms will declare prophetic salvation, and the Gospel will announce that the promised one has indeed come into the world. In all this, the character of Mary takes a humble back seat. You know she is there and that the Lord has been working through her willing obedience.

Isaiah 7:10-16. Ahaz was an evil king of Judah who could not seem to do anything good in his life, except become the father of Hezekiah who was one of the rare good rulers of God's people. Both Ahaz and Hezekiah are listed in the genealogy of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. Despite all the evil performed by Ahaz, which had invited many disasters to befall Judah, the prophet Isaiah provides him with one of the more famous prophecies regarding the Messiah. The virgin will conceive and bear a son and she will call his name Immanuel. The Hebrew word for virgin (עַלְמָה *almah*) is debated by opponents of the Gospel in an effort to disprove the virgin birth of Jesus from Mary. *Almah* is used seven times in the Hebrew Scriptures, and in all other cases means *young maiden* and not specifically an unmarried virgin. However the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures produced several hundred years prior to Jesus and thus has no possible Christian influence, deliberately translates the Hebrew *almah* into the Greek word παρθένος (*parthenos*) which is the word *virgin* in Greek. The Jewish translators of the Septuagint saw a miraculous birth in Isaiah 7:14. God's redemption of the fallen world would indeed come through a virgin. The prophecy is strengthened by the incredible name the child will carry, *Immanuel*. Biblical names often record within themselves some aspect of the child's birth, expression of current historical events at the time of birth, or aspects of the character of the baby. In this case the name *Immanuel* reflects the true nature of his character. Jesus born of the virgin Mary is no normal child. He is by nature *God with us*. Man will not save themselves for that is the work of God.

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19. Psalm 80 is attributed to a chief musician called Asaph and, like Psalms 45, 60 and 69, is set to an unknown musical piece called the Lilies. The psalm is a call for salvation. There is an

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acknowledgement that we are in need of a redeemer and that redeemer cannot be ourselves. In our own strength, we only end up getting ourselves more confused. Thus the appeal is for the true shepherd of Israel, God himself, to come and deliver salvation. In poetic form, Asaph asks three times for the Lord to restore his people and shine his face upon them. And while it is God who brings the redemption, Asaph knew that Israel needed real physical leadership too. Thus the psalm ends with a call for God to bless and empower a special person: the Son of Man who will act on the earth as the right hand of God. Heaven and earth will be working together. The title Son of Man (cf. Dan 7:13-14) is the phrase Jesus most often applied to himself. Here we see the prophetic voice of the psalmist declaring restoration through the guiding hand and leadership of a special man strengthened and empowered by the Lord. The son of Mary will cause the face of the Lord to shine again upon his people.

Romans 1:1-7. Paul writes to the community of believers in Rome, which he did not found nor had yet visited. The community, like most early churches, was a blend of Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus. Paul encourages them with the Gospel (the good news) of God. The gospel really is the good news of what God is doing through the life and work of Jesus the Messiah. The good news was promised long ago in the Hebrew Scriptures and not invented by the writers of the New Testament. This link to the Tanakh was proudly proclaimed by the apostle Paul but is largely ignored by preachers today. And the church is poorer for it. The prophetic voice of the Hebrew Scriptures provides hope of redemption, restoration and light, things our world sorely needs right now. Paul declares the promise had come through the seed of David, the son of Mary. Everyone loves a baby, and the manger scene does tend to be the focus at Christmas time. However, Paul continues to proclaim Jesus to be more than human, his divinity affirmed by his resurrection from the dead. The baby in the manger is more than human, and he has the power to save. The Christmas season is an ideal time to demonstrate to people that the good news of God is much more than the cute smile of a baby. The life and work of the son of Mary can and should impact our lives in a real way today.

Matthew 1:18-25. Many of the heroes of God in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) have miraculous birth stories. Sarah miraculously gives birth to Isaac at an advanced age. Moses is miraculously saved from infanticide by Pharaoh's daughter, and Samson's birth involves angelic foretelling along with supernatural strength. The nativity of the Messiah is in good company as the birth of Jesus is likewise miraculous with the added tension of scandal. Mary is discovered to be pregnant prior to her marriage to Joseph. Trying to maintain family honour in a world where honour and shame play a huge role in community life, Joseph attempts to hide the pregnancy. Matthew abruptly but plainly tells us the conception was the work of the Holy Spirit. The major details of the visit by Gabriel to Mary occur in Luke's Gospel only. Matthew's Gospel gives us the account of the angelic visit to Joseph. The angel is unnamed, unlike in Mary's visitation, and addresses Joseph as a son of David, indicating his lineage to the royal house of Israel. Both Mary and Joseph were told by heavenly messengers that God was working through his Holy Spirit to bring salvation to his people. Both will have to choose to live with the shame and scandal of premarital pregnancy. That shame will not go away with the birth of the child.

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Mary will endure scorn and ridicule throughout her life as no one will believe that Jesus was immaculately conceived, not even the brothers and sisters of the Lord.

We can and should take courage from the example of Mary and Joseph. The story of Christmas could not have begun without the willingness and obedience of this young couple. We should take the time to bless them for their faithfulness and encourage ourselves to follow their example. We certainly should not ignore their sacrifice, especially not for the sake of a Protestant-Catholic debate. Matthew also points out the prophetic fulfilment of Isaiah 7. Interestingly the angel will provide the name of the Messiah for Joseph, that is Jesus (*Yeshua* in Hebrew) even though Isaiah declared the name as *Immanuel*. Both names describe the character and mission of the Messiah. *Yeshua* means *God saves* and *Immanuel* means *God with us*. Those names are titles, prophetic callings and identify markers for the work of God through Jesus. The Gospels declare the redeemer to be more than a man, though a man nonetheless. It is the mystery of God that many found hard to believe at the time and still do in the present day. The news was proclaimed by heaven, and it continues to be proclaimed by God's messengers on earth.

ACNA Readings

Psalm 24. Many commentators attribute this psalm of David to the occasion of bringing the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. On such an auspicious occasion, David begins by declaring God to be the majestic ruler of the world. This is actually more of a profound statement than we might initially think. In the ancient world, prominent deities were attached to regions and nations and directly to the well-being and success of their peoples. Israel was a tiny obscure kingdom compared to the might and grandeur of Egyptian and Mesopotamian realms. Outsiders could easily think that the gods of Assyria and Babylon were mightier than the God of Israel simply by comparing the wealth and might of the respective nations. David however declares the Lord to be the true sovereign and ruler of all the earth. It's a powerful, bold and prophetic statement for there was no way that the majority of the earth could possibly know anything about the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob at that time. But they do now! The story of Christmas about a Jewish boy, born to Jewish parents, in a Jewish town as the Jewish Messiah has now gone around the world and captured the hearts of billions. Two billion people and more will read the Christmas story this season, will sing and rejoice with Christmas songs and will take hope and comfort in the redeemer of the world. "Who is this king of glory?" is the question asked by David. It is the son of Mary, the son of God and the light to the nations.

About the author. The Rev. Aaron Eime is a deacon at Christ Church Jerusalem and a teacher for CMJ Israel. Aaron studied in the master's program at Hebrew University with a focus on early Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible. He also studied psychology and sociology at Queensland University in Australia. Aaron is a dedicated Bible teacher exploring the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. He reads Aramaic and ancient Greek and is fluent in German and Hebrew. He has taught internationally, including in Europe, North America, Hong Kong, and China. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.