

## **Advent Lesson Three: The Birth of the King**

**Objective:** To read through traditional Advent readings about the coming King and Kingdom. Today we remember that God is with us – that he came to us in the form of a baby born in Bethlehem. Although living in the world is often difficult, we have the assurance that God is with us and that he is doing a new thing.

### **Some Ideas for teachings these classes:**

1. Read through all the scriptures in class. You could ask four different people in the class to read each scripture. This will take up a lot of time, but since this is built on the Advent readings, I think it's good for everyone to read/hear all of them even more than just talking about them – it is okay to cut the discussion short because you spend so much time reading.
2. I have written this in a question and answer format, but you can use whatever format you would like. Some questions are based directly off of the scripture and others are ones for people to think about and give their own thoughts based on the passage and reflection on their own experience and knowledge. I have written questions that might work well, but you may have better ones! Don't feel like all the questions need to be answered, the most important thing is to read the scriptures and talk about the hope that we have in Christ as God with us.
3. At the end of each lesson there is a short, written prayer that goes with the Advent readings. You could use it to close out your class, or you can disregard it.

A challenge in our readings today is to address them in their Old Testament context before we jump right to the New Testament meaning. This will be especially true in the Isaiah passage. We need to try to sit in the tension for a few minutes as we look at the text.<sup>1</sup>

**Read Isaiah 7:10-16 (NIV)**

<sup>10</sup> Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, <sup>11</sup> “Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.”

<sup>12</sup> But Ahaz said, “I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test.”

<sup>13</sup> Then Isaiah said, “Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? <sup>14</sup> Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. <sup>15</sup> He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, <sup>16</sup> for before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.

At the beginning of chapter 7, King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah of Israel go to attack Jerusalem but are unsuccessful. King Ahaz of Judah is so scared of those two countries uniting that his heart “shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind” (Isaiah 7:2). God tells him not to be afraid and that the two kings will not be able to

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<sup>1</sup> Gene M. Tucker, “The Book of Isaiah 1-39: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections.” Pages 26-305 in *Introduction to Prophetic Literature, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Baruch, Letter of Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel* Vol. 6 of *New Interpreter’s Bible*. Edited by Leander E. Keck, et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 113.

overcome Jerusalem. He tells Ahaz, “If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.” In 7:10-16, God is once again telling Ahaz to trust in him.

It was common for kings to ask the Lord for a sign before they went into battle, but here Ahaz refuses to ask for a sign *even when* God tells him to.<sup>2</sup> We don’t know much about this passage, but it sounds like God takes Ahaz’s unwillingness to ask for a sign as a lack or failure of faith.<sup>3</sup> Through Isaiah, we sense God’s impatience with Ahaz’s lack of faith. We know that God has just told Ahaz that if he does not stand firm in his faith, he will not stand at all, and Ahaz sounds like he has very little faith.

**God wants Ahaz to have faith that he will take care of him. But Ahaz is afraid. Why is it so hard to trust God when we are afraid?**

Isaiah tells Ahaz that God will give him a sign (even though he did not ask for one) – a young woman will get pregnant and have a son and will call him “Immanuel” (meaning “God with us”).<sup>4</sup> When Isaiah makes this prophecy, he is talking about a woman during his own time. Isaiah says that within a short time (the child will eat curds and honey as soon as he is weaned), the threat of the two kings will be over. We don’t learn how this will happen – just that it will.

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<sup>2</sup> Tucker, 111,

<sup>3</sup> Tucker, 111.

<sup>4</sup> On the word “virgin” if you are using the NIV: (The NRSV translates the word “young woman.”) The Hebrew originally said, “young woman” which had no connotation about her marital status or sexual experience. The Greek version of the Bible that Matthew used had translated “young woman” to be “virgin.”<sup>4</sup> (I don’t think this needs to be made an issue of in class, but it is helpful information in case a question comes up.)

## Why is this good news for people during the time of Isaiah?

God will take care of the Israelites, and the other two kingdoms will be soon be destroyed. If the child is eating curds and honey when he is weaned, then city must not stay under siege for long. It is also good news that God cares about a woman and her child even during a time of “concrete problems” such as threats of war and international politics.<sup>5</sup> God knows and cares about individuals even when the world is in turmoil.

The best news is that *God is with us*. He is with Ahaz even when Ahaz is not ready to fully trust him. God is not dependent Ahaz’s faith in him – he is free to be with whom he chooses to be with and free to act as he wants to act.<sup>6</sup> We are never good enough for God to be with us – we cannot believe enough or be righteous enough to be good enough for God. *He chooses to be with us*. This is good news for the ancient Israelites and good news for us!<sup>7</sup>

## Read Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

<sup>1</sup> Hear us, Shepherd of Israel,  
you who lead Joseph like a flock.  
You who sit enthroned between the cherubim,  
shine forth <sup>2</sup> before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh.

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<sup>5</sup> Tucker, 113.

<sup>6</sup> David McLain Carr, “Light in the Darkness: Rediscovering Advent Hope in the Lectionary Texts from Isaiah,” *Quarterly Review* Vol. 15, no. 3, (Fall 1995): 295-320. *ATLASerials PLUS, Religion Collection*, EBSCOhost (Accessed November 20, 2019), 311.

<sup>7</sup> **Note for teachers:** There is debate among scholars on if this text is about judgment or promise. There are valid arguments that go both ways. For our purposes of reading this text as one fulfilled in Matthew with the birth of Jesus, we will focus on the good news of God with us.

Awaken your might;  
come and save us.

<sup>3</sup> Restore us, O God;  
make your face shine on us,  
that we may be saved.

<sup>4</sup> How long, Lord God Almighty,  
will your anger smolder  
against the prayers of your people?

<sup>5</sup> You have fed them with the bread of tears;  
you have made them drink tears by the bowlful.

<sup>6</sup> You have made us an object of derision to our neighbors,  
and our enemies mock us.

<sup>7</sup> Restore us, God Almighty;  
make your face shine on us,  
that we may be saved.

<sup>17</sup> Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand,  
the son of man you have raised up for yourself.

<sup>18</sup> Then we will not turn away from you;  
revive us, and we will call on your name.

<sup>19</sup> Restore us, Lord God Almighty;  
make your face shine on us,  
that we may be saved.

This Psalm is a lament from a community that needs restoration and recognizes God as the one who can help. However, it sounds like they believe God is not listening to them and is absent from them (80:1). We tend to like happy Psalms or Psalms of praise, but the ancient Israelites recited *all* of the Psalms (although not all at the same time!) as part of their worship. They were comfortable with the idea of lamenting, comfortable with asking God hard questions. Imagine what it must have been like for the

Israelites who had their land taken over by the Romans, who were waiting on some kind of Messiah to save them, to recite this Psalm.

### **What feelings are expressed in this Psalm?**

#### **How does the Psalmist describe God?**

God is Israel's Shepherd and King (sits or is "enthroned" between the cherubim)

He is the one who can save them, restore them

The Psalmist seems to blame God for the people's problems – he seems absent (80:1), asleep (80:2), angry with them (80:4-6)

#### **What does the Psalmist ask of God?**

The Psalmist asks God to save them, restore them, let his face shine so that they can be saved and give them life. In the Old Testament, to be saved usually means to remain alive; and the phrase, "let your face shine," is usually a request for God to be present.

They recognize that it is God's presence that gives them life.<sup>8</sup> They have no concept of the Incarnation, but they desire Immanuel or "God with us."

#### **Where can we find hope in this Psalm?**

In the midst of great difficulties, the Psalmist believes that God can save the people.

Even though he believes that God is absent and not listening – and also the cause of their

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<sup>8</sup> J. Clinton McCann, Jr, "The Book of Psalms: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections." Pages 640-1280 in *1&2 Maccabees, Introduction to Hebrew Poetry, Job, Psalms*, Vol. 4 of *New Interpreter's Bible*. Edited by Leander E. Keck, et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 999.

problems - he still believes that God is the answer. He desires and is courageous enough to ask for restoration and presence from God.

As Christians we also recognize our suffering and the times when God seems absent. Yet, we affirm with the ancient Israelites that our very lives are dependent on God and his presence with us. Jesus himself shows us this by dying on a cross – he goes through a time when God seems completely absent from him in order to be victorious.<sup>9</sup> As Christians we see that through Jesus’ death on the cross, we have forgiveness, restoration, and life. Clinton McCann writes that we “dare to see and expect the reign of God where others see only chaos and expect nothing.” Like the ancient Israelites as they recited the Psalms of lament, we repent by turning and accepting God’s love – which leads to life.<sup>10</sup>

### **Read Romans 1:1-7 New International Version (NIV)**

**1** Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God— **2** the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures **3** regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, **4** and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. **5** Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name’s sake. **6** And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

**7** To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people:

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<sup>9</sup> Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34.

<sup>10</sup> This paragraph and quote based on McCann, 10001.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul writes to the Roman Christians to show them how God's covenant and purpose have been made clear to the world through the gospel.<sup>11</sup> In the words of N.T. Wright, Paul believed that "the one God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the creator of the world, had now brought world history to its climax in Jesus."<sup>12</sup> The gospel, the good news for the whole world, is about Jesus.

Paul calls himself a "servant" (or "slave") of Christ Jesus. When Paul used the word "Christ," he intends for his readers/hearers to hear a royal overtone. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed king of Israel, who was promised by Scripture and was to be the ruler of all other earthly kings.<sup>13</sup> Paul is a servant of this king, Jesus Christ, and he has come to announce the gospel.

In Paul's context the word "gospel" meant that a messenger would bring good news to Jerusalem such as the news of Babylon's defeat, the end of the exile, and the return of YHWH to Zion; in the pagan world, it was used to announce the attainment of a higher position or birthday of a ruler or emperor.<sup>14</sup> Paul is announcing a gospel that is a fulfillment of scripture and of a king whose rule is above all others.

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<sup>11</sup> N.T. Wright "The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections." Pages 394-769 in *Acts, Introduction to Epistolary Literature, Romans, 1 Corinthians*, Vol. 10 of *New Interpreter's Bible*. Edited by Leander E. Keck, et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 416.

<sup>12</sup> N.T. Wright, 416.

<sup>13</sup> N.T. Wright, 415.

<sup>14</sup> N.T. Wright, 415.

### **What do we learn about Jesus?**

He is the Son of God – not only is he a king, but he is the actual Son of God, he is divine.

He is the descendant of David in his earthly life, so he is also human. The miracle of the incarnation is clear here even when Paul is not writing about the incarnation. Jesus is both human and divine.

He is resurrected from the dead, showing that he is truly the Son of God.

He is Jesus Christ our Lord – King, ruler over all.

Paul is announcing the good news that scripture has been fulfilled - the Messiah has come in the person of Jesus, who is the Christ. This news is life changing! The people's first allegiance is no longer to the emperor of Rome or to any other ruler over them – it is to Jesus Christ the Messiah, who is the Son of God. They follow him. Their allegiance is to him.

### **How do you think Paul thought his message affected the lives of the Roman believers?**

Paul is purposefully including the Gentiles in this story – this story of a Messiah that came as a part of Israel's story is now included for the whole world. It is through Jesus Christ that Paul is able to call people from the Gentiles to the faith and to belong to Jesus Christ. Roman believers would have put the emperor on par with the divine – the emperor was no longer the most important ruler. Jesus was over the emperor.

### **What does it mean for us that our first allegiance is to be to God?**

### **Read Matthew 1:18-25 New International Version (NIV)**

<sup>18</sup> This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

<sup>20</sup> But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

<sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

<sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. <sup>25</sup> But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Imagine being Joseph. The incarnation is difficult enough to grasp from afar – exactly how divinity and humanity were combined in Jesus was a major controversy in the early church. Imagine being the father of the one who is The Word who became flesh (John 1:14), the one conceived by the Spirit (Luke 1:31-35), the reflection of God’s glory (Hebrews 1:3). How did the Son of God become a baby? This is a mystery. To us, it is a mystery worth pondering. To Joseph, this was a mystery that he may have thought needed solving, a mystery that changed the projection of his life.

Matthew writes that Joseph was faithful to the law. The law said, “neither shall you commit adultery” (Deut. 5:18). The law also said that a man could write his wife a bill of divorce if she did not please him (Deut. 24:1-4). Joseph knew the law.

### **Why do you think Joseph wanted to dismiss her quietly?**

The wording “just when he had resolved to do this” makes it seem that it took him some time to decide what to do. Joseph had mercy on Mary. It seems like he did not want to embarrass her – whether this was because he loved her or because it was just who he was, we don’t know.

Jesus will go on in Matthew 9:13 and 12:7 to tell the Pharisees to go learn what it means to desire mercy and not sacrifice. It seems that Joseph had a good idea of what mercy meant before Jesus ever told the Pharisees to think about mercy. But being merciful can be scary. What if you get taken advantage of? What will people think of you if you show mercy? Joseph was willing to be courageously merciful. But then God asks him to do something even harder.

### **What does the angel ask of Joseph? What does he ask him to believe?**

The angel tells Joseph not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife. He tells Joseph that the child she has conceived is from the Holy Spirit and that this child will save the people from their sins.

Can you imagine being Joseph at this point? He knew the law, so he probably knew the prophets. But, it seems unlikely that at this point he started to think of all the ways Scripture might be being fulfilled. Instead, he lives by faith. God told Ahaz to stand firm in his faith. Joseph is a man who stands firm.

### **What does Joseph do?**

Joseph obeys the angel and takes Mary as his wife. Joseph is used to obeying the law which says that adultery is wrong. The incarnation had to be difficult if not impossible for him to understand – imagine hearing about conception by the Holy Spirit! But Joseph trusted God in a way that Ahaz did not – could not. He was willing to take this sign of this fulfillment of scripture (a virgin will conceive and bear a son who shall be called Immanuel) and trust in God.

Kimberly Richter writes about the awkwardness of the incarnation: “A baby conceived by the Holy Spirit. An angel appearing in a dream. The Lord of the universe incarnate in a baby.”<sup>15</sup> It’s awkward. Incomprehensible. There is no precedence for this. The world is being transformed by a baby being born to a young woman whose husband has not slept with her. A baby is being born who will save everyone from their sins.

The angel refers to Isaiah 7 when the baby would be called “Immanuel” or “God with us.” God is with them in the form of a baby. And as Jesus grows and matures he stays with the people. And right before he leaves, he says in the last sentence of Matthew, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). He is with us still through the Holy Spirit.

**What does it mean to you that God is with you? That he is with us?**

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<sup>15</sup> Kimberly C. Richter, “The Advent Texts: Glorious Visions, Dogged Discipleship.” *Journal for Preachers* vol. 28, no. 1 9 (Advent 2004), 3-10. *ATLASerials PLUS, Religion Collection, EBSCOhost* (Accessed December 3, 2019), 9.

Our world is no messier than the world that Jesus was born into. In Matthew 2, Joseph and Mary will go to Bethlehem, and Magi from the East will come to worship Jesus. Even from the beginning, the word of the Messiah, the King, is spread out further than we can imagine. But, those in power are afraid – King Herod does not want to be displaced by this baby. So, he has all the boys under the age of two in Bethlehem and surrounding areas killed. Can you imagine? This is the darkness of the world that Jesus came into – as a helpless, young babe. Yet, he came. And because he came, the Magi in the East have hope, the people of Israel who had waited for so long have hope, and the Gentiles can have a hope they never even knew they could have. And today, we know that God is still with us. May we, as Joseph did, be open to the will of God – be open for God to be with us, to be guiding us, and to do new things through us. During this season, may we contemplate what it means for the Son of God to be willing to enter the messiness of our world as a human, and may we love others with the love that he has for the world.

Prayer:

O God of Elizabeth and Mary,  
you visited your servants with news of the world's redemption  
in the coming of the Savior.  
Make our hearts leap with joy,  
and fill our mouths with songs of praise,  
that we may announce glad tidings of peace,  
and welcome the Christ in our midst. Amen.