

## **“Emmanuel”**

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Based upon Isaiah 7:10-17; Matt. 1:18-25

When you tell people that you are going to seminary, one of the first things they often say is “Be careful. I hear that going to seminary can destroy your faith.” There’s a common misconception that if you study the Bible in a text-critical, not just devotional way, then it makes it harder to believe in the Gospel. I supposed that might be true for fundamentalists who grow up interpreting the Bible literally and unquestioningly; but I have found that the more I have learned about the Bible’s authorship, and the history of the people whose stories it records, the more, not less, I have believed. My intellectual understanding allows me to integrate better my faith with my knowledge of how the “real world” works. In other words, I don’t have to suspend disbelief or adopt magical thinking. My faith is grounded in history, reality, Scripture, and mature theological thinking.

I believe your faith can and should be grounded this way too, which is why at the risk of making some of you confront your assumptions today, I want to talk about the Emmanuel prophecy that Matthew famously cites in today’s gospel lesson: “This took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.’” Of all the many names and titles for Jesus, Emmanuel is especially beloved to Christians of all stripes because, as Matthew explained, it means “God is with us.” This is what most of us yearn for and celebrate every Christmas: God with us in Jesus, the Christ, offering us love, understanding and hope,

As a child I heard these words read every Christmas and believed that if Jesus’ birth matched what Isaiah had prophesied, then clearly Jesus was the Messiah. But when we studied this prophecy in seminary, I began to see things that had slipped past my attention in the magic glow of childhood Christmas Eve services, things like the obvious— Jesus was not actually named Emmanuel as the prophecy said he would be, and the more subtle, like the fact that Matthew quoted the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament, which mistranslated the original Hebrew. Isaiah never said that a virgin would bear a child named Emmanuel. He said a “young maid” would. There is a distinct word for virgin in the Hebrew that he could have used but didn’t. So, does this mean that Jesus’ birth did not fulfill the prophecy as Matthew said it did? Does it mean that Mary wasn’t a virgin or Jesus was not the Messiah?

These are the kinds of questions that make people worry in seminary. But have no fear, I am not here to tell you that Matthew was wrong. Jesus was and is the Messiah, Emmanuel, thanks be to God! And as far as Mary’s pre-delivery “status” goes, all I can tell you is that regardless of the translation error in the Septuagint, tradition has always held that she was a virgin. I have no facts that can prove otherwise. But the story of why Matthew saw Jesus in Isaiah’s prophecy is not as simple as “Isaiah predicted it and Jesus fulfilled it.” To understand why Jesus was Emmanuel to Matthew, notwithstanding the difference in his name, we need to understand why Matthew included the prophecy in his Gospel. To do that, we need to go back to the time of the original prophecy, not in order to do a matchy-matchy exercise of words and

circumstances, but so that we can appreciate the nature of the promise Isaiah originally voiced. To put it another way, we need to try to read the Bible forwards from Old to New, instead of backwards, as Christians usually do. Once you know and love Jesus, it's hard not to read the Bible backwards and hear in ancient texts descriptions and promises that remind us of Jesus. But if we can set aside our assumptions for a minute, and start with the ancient words first, then we discover that they can change our understanding of Christ in very helpful and powerful ways. This is especially true of the Emmanuel prophecy.

When First Isaiah originally delivered his prophecy, he was speaking to a king named Ahaz, who ruled over the Southern Kingdom of Judah during the 8<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.E., a period of Israel's history known as the "divided kingdom period." At that time, the Assyrian empire was a growing threat, sweeping across the Fertile Crescent like a big dark cloud consuming everything in its path. Syria and the Northern Kingdom of Israel were the next in line geographically to be eaten alive by the empire. Needless to say, they didn't want this to happen. So, they reached out to Ahaz in Judah in the south, wanting to form an alliance with him on the theory that going three-against-one would give them a better chance of survival against Assyria. When Ahaz refused to join the alliance, Syria and Israel then turned on Judah, launching what came to be known as the Syro-Ephraimite War. They thought if they could conquer Judah quickly, then they would still be able to use its resources to defend themselves as originally planned.

For a long time they were winning, which is why when Isaiah went to deliver his message to Ahaz, he found the king outside the city inspecting the water supply. He was trying to prepare for Jerusalem to be under siege. Isaiah walked over to Ahaz to deliver a message from God. It was a message in two parts. The first part was unspoken. Isaiah brought with him his son, Shear-jashub, whose name meant "*A remnant shall return.*" Isaiah and other prophets like Hosea used their children as performance art, giving them all kinds of crazy and horrible names that were really prophetic messages. Shear-jashub's message was that Jerusalem would be conquered, but the Davidic covenant would endure. A remnant of people would return from exile, ensuring that a descendant of David would rule again in Jerusalem. The second part of Isaiah's prophecy was that God was willing to provide Ahaz with a sign to reassure him that God would help him, so he could have the faith to resist the temptation to make political alliances. That sign would confirm that all Ahaz needed to do was trust in God.

Ahaz didn't want to hear any of it. He didn't want to contemplate that Jerusalem would fall and he would lose power. So he refused to ask for a sign. The text makes him sound pious in his refusal, but that was really an act for Isaiah. Ahaz was one of the bad kings of Judah, who encouraged the worship of pagan Gods and even sacrificed his own son to one of them. He wasn't really worried about offending God. He refused the sign because he didn't want to listen to what God had to say. He had already decided that he would make an alliance with the enemy empire Assyria to protect his throne and city.

Isaiah said God wasn't going to take "no" for an answer. God was going to give him a sign whether he wanted one or not. The sign was going to be that a woman would deliver a son and name him Immanuel, (which is spelled with an "I" in the Hebrew and an "E" in the Greek). Isaiah did not promise that the baby would be God. He would simply be performance art like

Isaiah's children, reminding the people that God was with them even though everything seemed dark and threatening. From the way the text is written, it seems likely that Ahaz knew the specific woman Isaiah was talking about, who was already pregnant. Some scholars think it was a woman in Ahaz's harem, others, that it was Isaiah's own wife. In any case this was not a messianic prophecy that in 750 years or so God was going to send Jesus. That would not have offered the least bit of comfort to Ahaz, who was neither a long-term planner nor a devout disciple of Yahweh.

Why then would Matthew say this prophecy was fulfilled in Jesus' birth? Was he just proof-texting with a Greek concordance looking for virgin birth prophecies to match? I don't think so. Matthew, who was a devout Jew before he became a devout Christian, wrote his Gospel as an exercise in Jewish apologetics. He wanted to persuade his Jewish brothers and sisters that not only was Jesus God's chosen Messiah, everything about him was consistent with the God the Jews already knew and worshiped, notwithstanding the crucifixion. Accordingly, Matthew wove the story that the Jews already knew into the story that Christians told about Jesus. For example, Matthew structured his Gospel like a second Torah, dividing it into 5 sections. He told Jesus' story in such a way as to cast him as a second Moses figure. He drew parallels between the Joseph of the Old Testament who was the reason the Israelites ended up in Egypt, and the Joseph of the New Testament, who fled to Egypt also shortly after Jesus was born. Everywhere he could, he cited Old Testament lessons and quotations to show that Jesus fulfilled them.

The term "fulfill" he used again and again was not the one that conveys honoring the terms of a contract, however. It was the one that more literally means to "fill until full," or in this case, to embody the promises of God completely. "Look," Matthew was saying, "this guy shared the law from a mountain like Moses; he spent time in Egypt like Joseph; he was the reason foreigners brought to Israel gold, frankincense and myrrh just like the prophets dreamed would happen one day. Look at all the parallels! Jesus is the embodiment of our story. He is the sum of God's promises and patterns." If Matthew had just been proof-texting, he would not have been very persuasive because many of the texts he cites have nothing to do with messianic hopes in their original contexts, a fact his Jewish audience would have recognized. But Matthew wasn't trying to make a purely legal case. He was trying to make a theological and emotional case, by evoking memories that shaped the Jews' understanding of their past, who they were, and how God worked.

The best way analogy I can think of to explain this is to think of it in terms of quilting. It has long been a common practice in America, and probably other countries as well, for people, usually women, to save snippets of fabric from all sorts of sources, clothing, flour sacks, curtains, whatever, and patch them together into quilts. If the quilts have all kinds of fabrics and a certain kind of stitching, they are called "crazy quilts." But they aren't really crazy in their purpose because they really are remembrance quilts. These quilts were designed in such a way that a mother could sit with her child and point out the squares, telling his or her story. "See this one, that was the dress you loved when you were little. And this one here is from the blanket you dragged everywhere. And here's a piece of my wedding dress so I'll always be with you; and here's one from Gramma Rosie's apron. Remember the cookies she like to bake for you?" The fact that a piece of dress ends up in the quilt doesn't change the fact that the dress was originally

meant to be just a dress. But when it is combined with all the other fabrics in a quilt, it is nevertheless transformed into something bigger and more meaningful than it ever was before. It becomes part of the story of the family or child's journey, complete with its joys and challenges. When that child grew up and got married, she could take the quilt with her and wrap herself in her full identity and story.

This is what Matthew does with his Gospel in a literary way. He takes a swatch of the Exodus story so that his audience will remember how God is a liberator, and a snippet of the Exile narrative, so that his audience will remember how the faithful endured dark days. He takes an obscure but legitimately messianic prophecy about Bethlehem, and a dream about foreign nations bringing gifts to Israel. Then he takes a story about an ancient promise that was once made to a king of Judah when enemies were all around and all hope was lost, and transforms it by combining it with the others in such a way that it takes on new meaning. "Remember when God offered the sign of a vulnerable child as proof that God would be with us? Well God has done it again, only this time the promise isn't summed up in a name, it's fully embodied in a human being. This baby isn't just going to save Judah, he's going to save the whole world, because this time the baby isn't performance art, he's God Incarnate, God physically with us. Jesus embodies what Isaiah wanted Ahaz to know, that with God on our side, all cannot and will not be forever lost. Jesus is our assurance, our savior, our hope."

When we bring Ahaz's situation into Jesus' birth narrative this way, then the Emmanuel prophecy becomes so much more than a Currier and Ives Christmas card celebrating God's unconditional love. The Emmanuel prophecy affirms two things. First, that God knows how bad things seem to us. God knows that we worry about the world or our lives falling apart. God knows that we wonder if God is absent because it feels that way. The Emmanuel prophecy is our sign that Jesus didn't come into the world just to comfort us or be our best friend; he came because he knew we needed a Savior. God in Jesus is our help and our hope. That's what Matthew was saying to a people living under Roman oppression who had need of both. "God sees the threats to God's kingdom and has a plan." Thanks be to God for that!

But the second message the Emmanuel prophecy affirms is that when Christ came into the world, or when he comes into our lives, his presence is more than a gift; it is also a call for radical trust. "I know that it looks like everything is falling apart or that I have abandoned you," God says, "so that you are tempted to despair and fear. I know that you are sorely tempted to throw your money at, and give your allegiance to, anyone or anything that seems the most powerful right now. But there is nothing in this world more powerful than I, and I promise to be with you in your vulnerability and suffering. I promise that I won't forget you or abandon you, even if things get messy for a while. Trust in me above all and do things my way, not your own."

Ahaz didn't listen to Isaiah. He went with his own plan, made an alliance with Assyria, and brought destruction upon Syria and Israel and slavery upon Judah as a result. Matthew didn't want his audience to make the same mistake by rejecting Christ. "He is the Savior we have dreamed of," he says with this Gospel. "Everything about him embodies our history and God's promises. Trust in him. Follow him. Even if the world is threatening, even if you have to change your plans or the way that you see the world, give your loyalty to Jesus and you won't be

disappointed. He sees the big picture in a way we cannot and will never leave us.” To ensure that his readers would not forget this message, Matthew book-ended his Gospel with references to Emmanuel. The word first appears in the beginning with Jesus’ birth as a name or a title, and then again at the very end as a description, when the risen Christ gives the Great Commission before ascending: “Remember *I am with you* even until the end of the age.”

So, here’s the challenge this text leaves us with today: if we recognize Jesus as Emmanuel in the Isaiah sense that Matthew did, not just the warm fuzzy Christmas sense, then we must ask ourselves, in what ways are we like Ahaz? Do we sell out God and God’s way to our fears? Do we reject the signs of God’s grace because we are in despair or would rather follow our own plans and agendas? Do we have the radical courage and faith to trust in God when all we see is danger or suffering all around? These are not cozy questions to ponder, but they are important ones. As you ponder, keep this in mind, however; whether you are worried about what’s going on in the world or in your family or in your own body and mind, the Emmanuel prophecy says, “Don’t give up on God because God has not given up on you.” Wrap yourself in the quilt of God’s experience with our spiritual ancestors, and put your trust in the one who embodied all of God’s promises fully. Our Emmanuel is with us in more than name only, and even now has the power and desire to lead us into a future with hope. Thanks be to God! Amen.