

Sermon Notes – December 18,, 2022
The Holy Gospel of St. Matthew 1: 18-25
Peace Lutheran Church
“Emmanuel, God With Us!”

This is our chance, once every three years, to hear Matthew’s story of the annunciation and birth of Jesus. It’s a bit different from Luke’s account: the annunciation is to Joseph rather than to Mary (in the first three versions impelling Joseph to preserve the safety of Jesus and Mary), and the birth is mentioned only in passing. Due to the pregnancy, Joseph was required by law to break the engagement, though he was prepared to be generous, doing so quietly rather than publicly. But neither obedience to the law nor generosity is sufficient in this case.

Jesus is a meaningful name in two ways. First, it means “God saves,” as Matthew explains. Second, it is related to Joshua, the successor of Moses the law giver, who actually led the Israelites into the Promised Land. The quote from Isaiah is complicated (see the next paragraph) but important. Here we have Jesus identified as “God with us,” an identification that will be important throughout Matthew’s gospel, up to and including its final verse.

The portion of Isaiah quoted in the gospel reading, comes from about 735BC, while Jerusalem is surrounded by the armies of Israel and Syria. It seems inevitable that the city will fall and be sacked, but the prophet assures the outcomes will be otherwise. He points to the pregnant courtier and promises that by the time the child is born (or weaned), the threat will be past. The point of the story is that God is with Judah and will rescue and preserve the chosen people, even when it appears hopeless. *Virgin* makes no more sense in this passage than the notion that it is primarily a prediction of what will happen seven and a half centuries later; rather, this is an affirmation that God save-something God does AGAIN in incarnation.

Romans begins the way any letter in the first century would have, but Paul transforms the formulaic with new meaning. Rather than simply identifying himself, he gives a short outline of his place and authority (and makes clear in passing that Jesus' place as the Son of God is witnessed to primarily by the resurrection, not a virgin birth). Then, rather than simply identifying the recipients, he reminds them of their calling and mission. Finally, he turns the equivalent of "Dear Madam or Sir" into a blessing from God the Father—"grace" (connected with the Greek salutation for "greeting") and "peace" (from the Jewish salutation, "shalom"). The everyday (as common as a birth) is transformed into something that leads us toward salvation!