

Emmanuel
Christmas
(Mt 1:23, Is 7:14)

Isaiah is the prophet whose writings are heard throughout the season of Advent as we prepare for Christmas. More than any other, he prophesies the coming of the Messiah, and the great Messianic age when God will gather all people to himself.

Isaiah was a prophet in the southern kingdom of Judah at a momentous time of calamity and political upheaval, when the Assyrian empire was rising to power and overwhelming the ancient world. It was during the time of Isaiah that the 10 tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel were exiled, and Jerusalem was almost destroyed as well.

Immediately before these events happened, Isaiah approached Ahaz, the king of Judah, in the name of the Lord, and told him to ask a sign from the Lord. *“Let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven,”* he said (Is 7:10). Isaiah challenged the king to ask God for the greatest sign possible, a sign greater than the cosmos itself, higher than heaven and deeper than hell.

King Ahaz, who was not a faithful king or a strong believer (2K 16:2), did not wish to engage Isaiah’s challenge, and refused to ask for a sign (Is 7:12). Isaiah promised that God would give the great sign anyway. It is probably Isaiah’s most famous prophecy, if not the most famous prophecy of the entire Old Testament: *“Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel”* (Is 7:14).

When St. Matthew speaks about Jesus’ birth at the beginning of his Gospel, this is the prophecy he quotes, and he explains that the name, “Emmanuel,” means “God with us” (Mt 1:23).

I’m sure when king Ahaz heard the prophecy, he must have been thinking, “that’s it?” Isaiah prophesied the birth of some child from a young woman, whose arrival would signify peace from all the foreign oppressors that threaten Judah. While that is a positive and hopeful thing, it is hardly earth-shaking, hardly “high as the heavens and deep as Sheol.”

The Scriptures are holy not because they were written by great prophets, but because they were written by God. And as the various human events unfolded which are recorded in the Bible, God used them to speak of other deeper events to come, spiritual things He was preparing from the beginning of history. Long after Ahaz and Isaiah were dead, and the tumultuous events of 700 B.C. had passed, the people of God recognized that there was something more to Isaiah’s prophecy than simply the events of king Ahaz’ time. He was speaking of the Messiah.

Even so, there was no way the people of the Old Testament could fully realize or imagine what the sign would be. When they heard that a “virgin would conceive and bear a son,” they presumed it simply referred to a young maiden, the way many young maidens married and gave birth to a firstborn son.

No one imagined that the prophecy meant that a young virgin would conceive a son *while remaining a virgin*. There were many times in the Old Testament God performed a great sign by bringing forth children who were miracles. The prophet Samuel was born to a childless couple in response to prayer, as a divine sign, as was the hero Samson. But no miracle compares to Isaac, who was born from Abraham and Sarah when they were already in their 90s, well beyond child-bearing years.

At the time of Jesus, God would perform another such miracle when John the Baptist was conceived by Zechariah and Elizabeth in their old age. This final miracle was given as a proof by the Angel Gabriel to Mary, that God “*for whom nothing is impossible*” (Lk 1:37), would accomplish something even greater with her. Because Mary, as she explained to the angel (Lk 1:34), was a virgin and consecrated to God such that she would “not know man.” The angel explained to her that the “power of the Most High would overshadow her” – she would conceive directly by the power of the Holy Spirit – and therefore the child to be born of her would be called holy (Lk 1:35).

This is the fulfillment of the ancient prophecy of Isaiah: a virgin shall conceive and bear a son. When Isaiah prophesied a *virgin*, no one at the time realized that God intended this prophecy to be fulfilled in a completely literal way. Isaiah may not have realized the full meaning of his words. Mary’s virginity is an essential and necessary requirement for God’s plan, because the child to be born from her would be the beginning of something new, a new human race. He would be born a man, a “son of Adam,” but he would not be born into the sin of Adam. Thus the angel told Mary, “*therefore, the child to be born will be holy.*”

In the birth of Christ, God accomplished something higher than nature, above anything that could happen in this world on its own. Maybe there are cases where childless couples are finally able to conceive and have a child; maybe there are even rare cases where children are born to elderly couples who seemed to be past the age of child-bearing. But in no way would it ever be possible for a child to be conceived through virginity. This is something impossible in Nature.

But even though a virginal conception is above nature, does that mean it is the greatest thing possible, “higher than the heavens and deeper than Sheol?” *That* is the sign which Isaiah prophesied, not merely a miracle of nature, but something greater than heaven itself!

Isaiah spoke of a future king, a Messiah, who would restore the Kingdom of God to its true glory, and whose coming would transcend not only nature, but history and all of time itself. The sign is bound up in the mysterious name of the future child: *Emmanuel*, “God with us.” Gabriel gives the meaning of the prophecy when he explains to Mary that the child to be born of her, conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, will be called not only “holy,” but “Son of God” (Lk 1:35).

The birth of Jesus is the greatest thing imaginable. It is something higher than the heavens and deeper than Sheol, something bigger than all of Creation, as big as God Himself, because it is God Himself. God, who is higher than the heavens, comes down to earth, and in his death on the Cross he descends to the depths of hell.

Just as no one imagined that Isaiah could be speaking literally when he said “a virgin would conceive,” no one could even begin to imagine that he was also speaking completely literally when he said the child to be born would be “God with us,” God among us. Not even the greatest angels could imagine that God would do such a thing as become man; that God would humble Himself to be born a child of a virgin.

When we see the humble manger scene, with the little baby lying in the hay, and the people and animals all gathered around, it’s hard to realize that this little scene is higher than heaven and deeper than Sheol. Even after 2017 years, we still can’t begin to appreciate how great this thing is that God promised to king Ahaz through Isaiah.

As we profess the Creed today, let us slow down and listen to the words of our faith. This prayer is given us to profess mysteries that are higher than the heavens and deeper than Sheol. And as we come to the heart of the Creed, which is the Christmas profession of the Incarnation, let us kneel during the words that recount what Isaiah first prophesied, that *a virgin shall conceive by the Holy Spirit and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.*