

Palisades Presbyterian Church
The Fourth Sunday of Advent
Sunday, December 23, 2007

Sisters and Brothers of Jesus
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What a mess! After a long and successful reign of some 52 years, Uzziah, King of Judah in the 8th century BCE succumbed to his pride.

Full with himself, perhaps, he entered the temple and burned incense upon its altar – a privilege reserved to the priests, not the king. As the 81 priests confronted Uzziah on his violation, a courageous act in itself for the priests to do, scriptures tell us that God smote him with leprosy, from which he never recovered. As his disease progressed and he died, he was buried in the field of kings in a lonely burial section, as a reminder that even kings must bow to God.

Uzziah's son, Jotham continued his father's rule, mirroring his early success. But Jotham's son – Ahaz, once again broke with faithfulness to God.

It is believed that Ahaz gave himself up to a life of wickedness, introducing many pagan and idolatrous customs. He received warnings not only from Isaiah, as we read in this morning's verses, but from Hosea and Micah, as well. None were heeded.

Under siege, he refused the advice of Isaiah, rejecting the invitation to call upon God for a sign to show that Isaiah was speaking the truth; instead, Ahaz appealed to Tilgath-Pileser III, King of Assyria for help with the threats he was receiving against Israel.

Incensed, Isaiah scolded the king, and told him that a sign would soon take place where a child would be born to a young maiden – someone they both would know – and the child would be called “Immanuel” – God is with us; and, in other words – “Not with you, Ahaz.”

The passage brings us into the continuing conflict of nations vs. nations and a real struggle between those who were calling for greater reliance upon God – and those who liked the “God-idea” but felt themselves either to be self-sufficient enough – or so fearful – that they relied on their own mistaken ability to control things.

This in itself is a powerful lesson to any reader, especially during the times in question – for all to see the high and mighty pay dearly for their lack of faith and excessive hubris. It was not, however, as Matthew describes it in this morning's second reading – a prophecy of the birth of Jesus from a virgin. Such a prophecy that would have been fulfilled seven centuries later would have made little sense to these times of conflict faced by Judah, let alone to Ahaz.

Sometime much later, when the Hebrew was translated into the Greek Bible, known as the Septuagint (LXX), the translator either intentionally or indirectly mistranslated the word '*almah*' in the Hebrew to *parthenos* in the Greek: that is, young woman of marrying age, perhaps a virgin – to virgin, itself.

So, we enter into the readings of Matthew who has taken the Scripture and directly linked Isaiah to the foretelling of the Birth of Jesus from the Virgin Mary.

The discrepancy does not invalidate the event, itself, but it does bring into an important discussion the method in which the latter text was achieved, unless one believes, as some do, that the scribe or scribes who translated the Hebrew were divinely moved to change the text in the ways in which they did.

I do think, though, that in the least – we have to acknowledge that Matthew, as others have done, has at least taken this prophecy out of its historical context.

These kinds of questions make many people uneasy, uncomfortable. Perhaps some of us are shifting in our seats at this moment, and there will be no resolution in these few (or many more) moments of dissonance together.

However, as sisters and brothers of Jesus in faith – the real question is whether or not we need props, that is historical renderings of questioning accuracy – to hold on to him as the one who was so filled with God and God's Spirit, so aware of who he and God and Spirit were – that we can follow him and his teachings and believe – without the magic, pageantry, or traditions.

As sisters and brothers do, we find one another in our hearts. It is for that reason, perhaps, that such things as narratives were written: to lead us to a place where we step off on faith – not facts, not fable – but faith.

Over these next few days, I am going to do my best to enter into that place, to suspend the need for anything – in order to believe – and just be present in all that we will recall and ponder.

It is there, in that place of the suspension of anything in order to believe that I believe our family, the human family, will find one another and peace.

After all, the kingdom of God is – and always has been – within.

Amen.