

TEXT: Isaiah 7:10-16, Matthew 2:18-25
THEME: God is with us
SUBJECT: Obedience of faith
TITLE: Clown and the Crown

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Messiah Moravian
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Matthew and Paul, along with all the other writers of the New Testament, read the Hebrew Bible in Greek. Why does this matter? Because the Greek translation, known as the Septuagint, didn't always get it right.

Matthew quotes the Greek translation of Isaiah 7:14, "Look, the *virgin* shall conceive and bear a son." The Hebrew of Isaiah 7:14 reads, "the young woman is about to conceive and bear a son." The Hebrew word, *'almah*, is used in Proverbs to describe a sexually active young woman.

Isaiah is not concerned with virginity, but with Ahaz trusting God. Before the son of a young woman about to conceive knows the difference between evil and good, the threat to Ahaz' kingdom will be alleviated.

The kings of Damascus and Israel formed an alliance against the king of Assyria. The Israelite king assassinated his predecessor, a supporter of the Assyrian king. Now Damascus and Israel want Judah to join their alliance.

King Jotham of Judah refused. Jotham died of unknown causes, leaving his twenty year old son, Ahaz, in charge. The unhappy kings of Damascus and Israel are on their way to impose their will on Ahaz. A prophet, Isaiah, shows up in the throne room to offer strategic military counsel.

I am reminded of Kierkegaard's parable of a traveling circus that caught fire. The manager sent the clown, already dressed and made up for his performance, into the neighboring village to get help, especially as there was danger of the fire spreading across the fields of dry stubble and engulfing the village itself.

The clown hurried into the village and requested the inhabitants to come as quickly as possible to the blazing circus and help put out the fire. But the villagers took the clown's shouts simply for an excellent piece of advertising, meant to attract as many people as possible to the performance; they applauded and laughed till they cried.

The clown tried in vain to convince the people there really was a fire. His supplications only increased their laughter; people thought he was playing his part splendidly — until finally the fire engulfed the village.

Kierkegaard knew people who claim to speak for God often appear ridiculous, sound half-baked and are easily dismissed as clowns. Ahaz has every reason to distrust military strategy offered by a prophet. Isaiah tells Ahaz to ask for a sign, any sign he wishes, one that reaches into the heavens or down into the realm of the dead.

Ahaz feigned piety, "I don't want to put God to the test." So Isaiah gives Ahaz a sign that God is with him: by the time a child born to a young woman is two or three, Damascus and Israel will be defeated.

I am not sure what kind of a sign this is, how reassuring it can be, when its fulfillment lies in the dim unknown while the enemy masses in the shadow of your border.

Joseph also must choose between trusting the reality his eye sees and the word he hears in a dream. Betrothal, in Joseph's world, is the first phase of marriage governed by law. During betrothal the woman lived with her father. Any sexual activity during this time was considered adultery.

Upon discovering Mary is pregnant, Joseph has two legal options. He can demand a public trial and if Mary is found guilty of adultery she can be sentenced to death by stoning. A second option, the "quieter" course of action, is to divorce her upon the testimony of two witness. That is what any reasonable man in Joseph's position would have done.

Having so resolved, Joseph, like his ancient namesake, dreams. In a dream an angel tells Joseph that Mary is as righteous as he is if not more so. "Trust me," says the angel, "and take her as your wife." Joseph could be excused for, anachronistically, humming a few bars of "Send in the clowns."

It is easy to understand how prophets, priests, theologians, angels even, anyone who claims to have a word from God, can appear to be out of touch with reality. Why should Ahaz believe Isaiah has a clue about military strategy? Why should Joseph believe he wouldn't be playing the fool?

Sometimes people who claim to speak for God, even people who at times rightly speak God's word, can at other times speak their own prejudices. John Calvin and Martin Luther were convinced that Isaiah 7:14 referred to a virgin, not a young woman. Calvin called Jews who insisted on "young woman" as the correct translation, "Christ's foes whom God maddens with a spirit of giddiness and strikes down in a stupor."

Luther said he would gladly pay a hundred guilders (four month's wages) to the "obstinate, damned Jews if Isaiah 7:14 really means "young woman" and not "virgin." He owes the money. Luther's animus to Jews set fires that continue to burn to this day.

The gospel according to Matthew is not dependent upon Mary being a virgin. Her virginity plays no role in the rest of the Gospel and doesn't even factor in the rest of his birth narrative. Matthew is interested, not in sexual relations, but in the idea of obedience, the obedience of faith. "When Joseph awoke from sleep, he *did* as the angel of the Lord *commanded* him."

Virgin birth played no role in Paul's understanding of Jesus. Paul calls himself a servant of Jesus Christ who was "declared/established/designated to be the Son of God by resurrection from the dead." It is Easter that is decisive for revealing who Jesus is. Furthermore, Paul shares Matthew's goal: "My apostleship," he writes, "is to bring about the obedience of faith."

I suspect many of our arguments about dogma, as well as many of our doubts about the reality of any word from God, are fueled by our resistance to doing what faith requires.

The obedience of faith can make us appear as foolish as Noah building an ark hundreds of miles from water, while the whole village laughs at our credulity. Ahaz's sanity would be suspect if he heeded Isaiah's advice. I suspect Joseph became the butt of many a joke in Nazareth.

The obedience of faith does not make us appear reasonable nor respectable. The obedience of faith saves us, just as it saved Ahaz and Judah, Mary and her baby.