

December 23, 2018  
**Only Wildly Out of Context**  
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Matthew 1:18-25

***[The Birth of Jesus the Messiah]***

*<sup>18</sup> Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup> But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:*

*<sup>23</sup> "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,*

*and they shall name him Emmanuel,"*

*which means, "God is with us." <sup>24</sup> When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup> but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.*

The context for Isaiah 7 is II Kings, chapters 16, 17, and 18. Ephraim was another name for the northern kingdom, Israel. Aram was a foreign power, trying to stave off the even larger powers of Assyria and Egypt. The king of Aram, King Rezin, recruited Ephraim (Israel) to help them try and take Judah, the southern kingdom, in order to expand their border between Egypt and Assyria. It almost worked.

But the king of Judah, King Ahaz, made an eleventh-hour deal with the king of Assyria, his enemy's enemy – a guy named Tiglath-pileser, who sent enough troops to drive the Arameans back and save Jerusalem. Which left Ahaz beholden to Assyria. Not ideal, but not wiped-out either. Summoned to Damascus to pay homage, he took some of his designers and engineers along and told them to study Assyrian religious temples, so they could build perfect replicas in Jerusalem.

God's spokesman in Jerusalem, Isaiah the prophet, saw all of this for what it was – covenant infidelity – and called the king out on it. "Ask God for what you need. Ask God for anything." But the help Ahaz wants isn't the help God wants to give. God wants to give faith and fidelity. Ahaz wants troops. Ahaz is some kind of arrogant though, talks to

the prophet as if he's doing God a favor. *"No really, I'm fine. Go ahead and take the day off, God; no need to worry your head about me, God."* I love the prophet's response: *"Is it not enough that you wear out mortals, you have to wear out God too?!"*

Then comes the hit of the prophetic text. *Judah shall be saved, but not by Ahaz. Another will reign. One not yet born. One called Immanuel, which means God with us. But that salvation shall not come before the judgment you fear has rained down on Judah. The very king you have trusted, the king of Assyria, is coming to crush you and yours, Ahaz and Judah, for your persistent, unwavering, infidelity.*

Since Matthew, the Isaiah text has been assigned to Baby Jesus in the manger, as though Isaiah himself had seven hundred years of foresight. Most likely, Isaiah was talking about Ahaz's second son, Hezekiah. Are we taking scripture wildly out of context to read Jesus into Isaiah, chapter 7? Did Matthew? Matthew wrote for Jews and so wove Jesus into their history's context.

Can we faithfully inscribe the text over our own nativity scenes? I think so, so long as we are honest with ourselves. This week I've been reading articles with titles like:

- Creative Christmas Eve Worship Planning;
- Top Ten Ideas for Meaningful Christmas Eve Services.

One had a link to a graphic of a crackling fireplace to run on the sanctuary screens. Single use is only \$7. Another suggested a foyer photo booth with reindeer and Santa props. And the craziest: fake snow that falls from the ceiling during the closing candlelight hymn – *Silent Night*, of course.

What exactly is out of context about how the church does Christmas, Friends? Celebrating the birth of Christ without the blare of corrupt and fearful kings making alliances with dictators – that is wildly out of context! Celebrating Christmas without the goose-step of 20,000 stamping boots getting louder every minute is Christmas wildly out of context. Celebrating Christmas without foreign armies to whom we'll be beholden. Or with preachers taking Santa pictures instead of doing their job, which is to preach keeping covenant with the God who made us free and to warn us of the consequences when we choose not to listen. It's all Christmas wildly out of context.

So yes. Only wildly out of this world's context can we know, *faithfully know*, and worship the baby Jesus. He is the one who comes where everything is broken and we keep trying to pretend it isn't. He is the one who comes to us to interrupt the judgment we brought upon ourselves before it destroys us all completely. The breaking-in of Christ breaks every definition of a life of faith in God: our sense of time and boundary; our understanding of relationship; even our vocabulary becomes a language foreign to this world. Words like *safe* and *rich* and *free* mean something different to this world than to followers of Jesus.

We are *safe* because Christ has saved us. And *rich* because we want for nothing God has not given. We are *free* because the principalities of this world can never manufacture the power to keep us apart from God. Words like *productive*, *successful* and *work* – who defines those words for us? this world or the love of God in Jesus Christ? How about the word *enough*? Or *happy*? Or *content*?

Friends, it's awfully easy to think sweetly of the season with lives as safe and rich as ours. To us *occupation* is a job – not a geo-economic-socio-political circumstance that bears down on us like a gathering storm. A poor peasant girl giving birth in a shack with animals is a story only rich white people could think is sweet.

We don't have little toy sets for the genocide one chapter over, little Roman soldiers tossing boy baby carcasses into wagons. That genocide one chapter over casts no shadow on our Christmas bliss, so long as we keep nativity next to the Christmas tree. Context is everything, remember? It absolutely is. Jesus belongs smack center of Isaiah, chapter 7.

Into this world's disgrace and brokenness, *God-came-to-us* because left to ourselves humanity ruins everything every time. We cannot, for the life of us, do right – by ourselves, by one another, by the earth itself. Our fear, failure, and greed infuriate the God who made us – and then break God's heart. God was moved to do once and for all what we could not, would not, did not.

God moved in the Christ event, from covenant to grace – a story we tell to the sounds of stamping boots and a crying baby or of Christmas trees and fake snow. It is our choice again, this year and every day, what story to believe and tell.

Would you pray with me?