

Isaiah 7:10-16 (CEB)

10 Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz: 11 “Ask a sign from the Lord your God. Make it as deep as the grave or as high as heaven.”

12 But Ahaz said, “I won’t ask; I won’t test the Lord.”

13 Then Isaiah said, “Listen, house of David! Isn’t it enough for you to be tiresome for people that you are also tiresome before my God? 14 Therefore, the Lord will give you a sign. The young woman is pregnant and is about to give birth to a son, and she will name him Immanuel. 15 He will eat butter and honey, and learn to reject evil and choose good. 16 Before the boy learns to reject evil and choose good, the land of the two kings you dread will be abandoned.

Matthew 1:18-25 (*The Message*)

The birth of Jesus took place like this. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. Before they came to the marriage bed, Joseph discovered she was pregnant. (It was by the Holy Spirit, but he didn’t know that.) Joseph, chagrined but noble, determined to take care of things quietly so Mary would not be disgraced.

20-23 While he was trying to figure a way out, he had a dream. God’s angel spoke in the dream: “Joseph, son of David, don’t hesitate to get married. Mary’s pregnancy is Spirit-conceived. God’s Holy Spirit has made her pregnant. She will bring a son to birth, and when she does, you, Joseph, will name him Jesus—‘God saves’—because he will save his people from their sins.” This would bring the prophet’s embryonic sermon to full term:

Watch for this—a virgin will get pregnant and bear a son;

They will name him Immanuel (Hebrew for “God is with us”).

24-25 Then Joseph woke up. He did exactly what God’s angel commanded in the dream: He married Mary. But he did not consummate the marriage until she had the baby. He named the baby Jesus.

“Make the Nations Prove: Peaceful Joy”

Joseph brushed the sawdust from his hands and began to put his tools away. Mallet, saw, and chisel were put into their proper places, as if ordering his things would order his thoughts, his heart. Finding ways to solve problems in his work, to join pieces of wood together smoothly, gave him great satisfaction; but the problem he faced now was not like his work. He had found the solution to it, but it gave no satisfaction, only pain. In the room next door, his oldest daughter had the evening meal ready, but tonight he had no appetite. The news he had heard this morning was too upsetting.

After his wife had died, he thought that he would NOT marry again, but the relatives pushed him. “Joseph, you are not so old, you need a wife. Who will take care of you when your daughter marries? Who will take care of your other children?” At last, a match was made for him with a young cousin, Mary. Though men and women not married to one another did not mingle, he’d had a glimpse of her now and again. A pretty girl with large dark eyes; there was something in those eyes that he could not define. A promise? Well, if it had been a promise it was one that had been given to someone else for just this morning another cousin, Eli, who was married to the nosiest woman in town, had come to tell him the news: Mary, Joseph’s betrothed, was pregnant! “Oh such shame has come on our family,” Eli moaned. “What are you going to do about this, Joseph?” Joseph just stood there looking at him. Finally he said, “Thank you for telling me, Eli. Now excuse me, I have work to do.”

He was angry and disappointed. He and Mary were to be married at the end of the year. How he had been longing for her to become his wife. He was, he admitted to himself, lonely. Though his first marriage was arranged, as this one was--as all marriages were--he and his wife had been blessed. Their love for each other had grown through the years. When she had died, Joseph grieved deeply. When he finally agreed to the betrothal to Mary, it had surprised him to feel hope surging in him again. But now this. It was a great affront to his honor, but even so he had decided that he would

not divorce her publicly. According to the law, he could have demanded that she be stoned; but no, he would not do that to her. That might be some men’s understanding of righteousness, but it was not his.

He finished up in the shop and went into the next room. His daughter brought him a bowl of stew and some bread, but he hardly touched it. The other children prattled about this and that, but he did not pay much attention. Finally he pushed his bowl away and went to bed.

Lying there in the dark, listening to the night sounds, he remembered words that his father Jacob had spoken long ago: “Whether you are working with wood or with people, the Lord will provide a way to overcome your difficulties, but you must have patience and you must have faith.” Jacob had demonstrated that every day of his life, but now Joseph thought that all the faith in the world could not undo the fact that Mary would no longer be his. He hoped that when he relinquished his claim to her, the father of her child would claim her. Oh, how the tongues of the village gossips would wag! He dreaded hearing them. He lay there for a long time, staring into the darkness until finally he drifted into sleep.

At first all Joseph could see was light, blinding light, then gradually it assumed a form, though the edges were not defined. It had no face, it had no mouth that he could see; all the same it spoke to him and he understood.

“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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” And then suddenly the light was gone. Joseph’s mind turned a page to the words of the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”

The words “God is with us” were still echoing in Joseph’s mind when he sat up in bed. He could hardly believe that it had been a dream. Somehow it had been more real than when he was awake. Mary, pregnant by the Holy Spirit--that was what the angel had said. But why would God entrust this child Jesus, this savior, to someone like him? A Galilean carpenter, a hick from the sticks? He wasn’t wealthy or learned in the law, and he was no longer young. He remembered when his other children had

been babies: so tiny, so fragile in his big callused hands. Would this child be the same? How would he raise such a boy? It seemed impossible. And then Joseph remembered the prophet’s words: “They shall name him Emmanuel, which means ‘God is with us.’” If God wanted him to do this, to wed Mary and to raise this child, then God would be with them. God had promised, and it would be so. Joseph was at peace with that!

At first light, Joseph got up. Today he would tell Mary’s family, and his, that he wanted to move the wedding date up. O how the tongues would wag! Well, they would wag whatever he did. Joseph had been given a task, and though he hardly felt prepared for it, somehow he would find a way to fulfill it. His father was right: by the grace of God, all difficulties could be overcome, if only one had patience and faith. God would provide. There he found peace!

(Inspired by the storytelling of Denise Bennett, as found in The Abingdon Women’s Preaching Annual, Series 2, Year A, compiled and Edited by Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, Nashville: Abingdon Press, © 2001.)