

WATCHING & WAITING
HOLY HIDDEN HUMAN

Texts on Sunday, December 22, 2013

Isaiah 7: 10-16 + 8: 3-4; Matthew 1: 18-25

You don't need to be a bible scholar to find out that the prophet Isaiah did not say that "a virgin shall conceive." Ancient Hebrew has a word for "virgin," but Isaiah used a different word, meaning "young woman." And he spoke not of "a" young woman but "*the* young woman," which suggests that he knew the woman of whom he spoke. If it's your guess that the young woman he had in mind was his own wife, you may feel the need of a bible scholar to back you up. You can find them by the dozens.

When I went to seminary, I felt a passion to get to the bottom of questions like this. I had seen that Matthew made a new meaning of the ancient Isaiah oracle, and I felt troubled that most Christians seemed unaware or even in denial about this. I was eager for the tools of the historical-critical method. In that first fall of my study, we read scholars who quickly laid things bare.

About 750 B.C., the northern kingdom of Israel made an alliance with its traditional enemy to the east, Syria. Together, they attacked Jerusalem, hoping to get rid of King Ahaz and compel his army to join their rebellion against the empire of Assyria. King Ahaz was terrified. Isaiah wrote that "his heart and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind." Ahaz wanted military aid to fight off Israel and Damascus. He was ready to make a pact with the Assyrian empire to get the needed help.

At the moment of crisis, the prophet Isaiah warned Ahaz not to deal with any foreign nation, but to trust in the Lord. Isaiah pressed Ahaz to seek from the Lord a sign of promise, but Ahaz refused to believe that God could help with such great dangers. This prompted Isaiah's famous Immanuel prophecy: *As sure as it is that my wife will conceive and give birth to a son; and as sure as the day is coming when this child will learn what is good for him and what is evil, just so sure is it that God is with us now in war—so sure that we are naming our son "Immanuel" as a sign that "God is with us."* When Isaiah and his wife had a son, Isaiah received from God a new word. Name the boy "*The spoil-speeds-the-plunder-hastens,*" for sooner than the child will utter the word "Mommy," Israel and Damascus will be plundered and destroyed.

That is the story behind "Behold! A virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel—God with us." What Isaiah meant, and what Matthew meant seem very different. Did Matthew bend his bible too far? In my seminary days, I thought so. Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick may have thought so, too. In 1922, before he was called to inaugurate this pulpit,

Fosdick got into a bitter church fight. From the pulpit of New York's First Presbyterian Church, Fosdick preached that a Christian need not believe that the mother of Jesus was literally a virgin. This teaching excited the local church, but eminent men in the denomination argued that Fosdick's teaching threatened the whole edifice of Christianity. They mustered forces to overthrow him. His famous sermon, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" held in focus this virulent controversy over belief in the virgin birth. Viewed more broadly, however, the conflict was over how to know what is true, whether by science, or by church teaching, or by yet other authorities.

Take a step back with me as we paint in broad strokes the early 20th century. It was the morning of the age of science. That time gave birth to this church, and regardless how new influences have changed Riverside since then, we would be wise to acknowledge our inheritance. Look: In a single generation had come electric lights, telephones, automobiles, the radio, the movies, airplanes, and rumblings from physics . . . $E=mc^2$. The awesome slaughter of World War I had dimmed the hopes of some poets and prophets that a new day was dawning, but the war itself had shifted power toward white America, which felt the thrill of burgeoning wealth and power. By revealing numberless things hidden for long ages, science wrested from religion and its high priests much of its authority to say what is so. Science seemed to put its power in human hands.

In this sense, science offered liberation from oppression and dogmatism, and many embraced these new powers, though at least as many feared them, and fled from them to various ideologies. This church was founded by modernists who thrilled to use their freedom to think a thing through to the end, to see what is really real under whatever light can be found. I think it is good when the religious relax about this aspect of science—this yearning to know—for religion and science share deeply in a passion to know what is really real. However, when the ax is laid at the root of magic and miracle, some fear that the whole tree of religious life will be taken down with all its fruits. Yet when that tree of magical belief does tumble from the clouds of fancy and lies inert like a fallen god, it looks more like an idol, an attempt to force true God to act and dance on a stage man-made. Feel by contrast the thrill of the revolution experienced by the architects of these columns, who hoped that your mind might be free to ask whatever question comes, so that you might take your crown.

Then came the rest of the 20th century. Science dreamed impossible dreams, and made the impossible bomb, and America dropped it. Hitler planned a final solution scientifically. Stalin and Mao and Pol Pot slaughtered millions on the way to their solutions. America destroyed every revolution

everywhere that threatened the flow of capital and let torture and lynching flourish at home and abroad to divide poor and rich, dark and white. Since 1940, more humans were destroyed by design than in all wars of all prior times and places—and every single one of them was murdered because some believed they could only have peace if they kept this or that for themselves. Under the tight shut lid of that need for power and greed, science could never fit its lever or shed its light. For those in whom hunger for more for themselves goes unregulated, science, like religion, brings neither solution nor salvation, but just another tool to advance their hideous strength.

In sum, let us agree that science has its way of seeing what is so, and freeing the mind. May the human species never abandon that lens or what can be learned looking through it. But science cannot save us; indeed, will damn us to a hot hell if not regulated by a different kind of seeing. Why, look how the geo-scientists and politicians conspire to suck from the bowels of the earth more oil than there is air to burn it, heedless of the coming fires for all things great and small. Whoever sees that we shall not be saved from ourselves by science knows that we are at the close of the age of science. Something new must come, and with it new politics and new religion, too.

Times like these are times to look deep into waters from which we have come. Sometimes we can see there a truth discarded in revolutionary zeal. Is it possible to look again now to ask whether Matthew was forever right to bend his bible as he did, and see the story of Christ Jesus to a virgin born, not because he had it from a doctor attending Mary; and not because he had it from his God dictated; and not because *Isaiah 'twas foretold it*—because he didn't! No. What if Matthew was right to bend the bible so because he saw that only what is hidden can save us? Only what is revealed to us, yet not by our own will, can save us. Only what is given, not taken, can bless us and grace us with peace, yet not as the world gives peace. Only the story of an "unto us a child is given" can we really receive.

Whatever else you receive from the Christmas stories, do not miss this. The baby is incognito. To the world, he looks like one more baby from one more coupling, maybe married, maybe not. That is all that's there for the naked eye to see, and all that's there for science. No fine birth, no heralds, no rich clothing. Not even a star is given that all can see, but only some to whom it is given. For all, there is only an unmarried girl with a big belly and her Joseph feeling jilted, though gentle about it. How he came to see this all quite differently; how he came to give the boy the name Jesus, which means "he will save"; how he came to peace was by a dream, says the story. Not by science, nor ordinary knowledge. In the emptiness of a dream in the midst of something near despair, all goodness was revealed to him, says the

story. In other words, the story of salvation through a virgin birth tells once more that to which we must always return. God comes to nothing.

Here is the thing. For creatures, what has not appeared as possible is in fact not possible. Only that which has appeared to our awareness is possible. Everything else is hidden, waiting, latent. Augustine wrote: "Many have sought light and truth, but they look outside themselves, where it is not." That which appeared to Matthew the Evangelist . . . science cannot see, for science looks only to things outside ourselves. But the birth of God comes to us always hidden within, in emptiness. God comes only in secret, to give life unseen, wholly spiritual. Matthew knew how Christ had come alive in himself—holy, hidden, human. Matthew then told his story right. He told how God always comes, as if in a dream, as if by an angel's message. For this reason, we tell and tell again the story that moves from empty womb to empty tomb, the story which begins, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name *God-with-us*."

Prepare the room in you where God is waiting to give birth. This is not inconceivable. This is possible.

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*The Riverside Church
in the City of New York*