

Isaiah 7: 10-16
Psalm 80: 1-7, 16-18
Romans 1: 1-7
St. Matthew 1: 18-25

Advent IV 2022.

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the virgin is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.”
Isaiah 7: 14

Some of us are familiar with the popular Canadian songwriter Bruce Cockburn. Cockburn converted to Christianity in 1974, but I don't think it would be fair to describe him as a “Christian” songwriter as we usually think of them. Certainly, many of his songs are mystic and spiritual, as he is making sense of the world around him, and in himself. But I suggest that the lyrics of many of his songs point us toward God himself...

For example, even the *title* of the song “Rumours of Glory” can be pause for thought. Do we see “rumours of glory,” in the world around us? The opening words are these:

Above the dark town
After the sun's gone down
Two vapour trails cross the sky
Catching the day's last slow goodbye
Black skyline looks rich as velvet
Something is shining
Like gold but better
Rumours of glory

“Like gold but better... rumours of glory...” Do we sense “rumours of glory,” this Advent season?...

Another example is Cockburn's song, “Wondering Where the Lions Are,” which begins,

Sun's up, uh huh, looks okay
The world survives into another day
And I'm thinking about eternity
Some kind of ecstasy got a hold on me

Even evil in this world isn't so threatening when “some kind of ecstasy got a hold on me:”

I had another dream about lions at the door
They weren't half as frightening as they were before
But I'm thinking about eternity
Some kind of ecstasy got a hold on me

God is at work in the world, outside the Church, sustaining the universe with his grace and power. I suggest that God *longs* – longs more deeply than we can ever comprehend – for us all to *wake up* to eternity – *wake up* to the gospel – and to respond to Jesus Christ: God who became one of us, so we can be flooded with his presence and his love forever, through his astonishing death and resurrection to new life...

Today's first reading is from Isaiah 7. It's helpful for us to know what's going on, when Isaiah prophesies this message. This part of Isaiah was over 700 years before the birth of Jesus. The local King of Judah, Jehoahaz (usually shortened to "Ahaz") didn't have much time for the Lord. The king of Israel in the north, and the king of Syria, tried to pressure Ahaz to resist the Assyrian Empire. Instead, Ahaz tried to forge an alliance with Assyria, but doesn't pay any attention to what the Lord is trying to tell him through the prophets. In fact, Ahaz arranges for his son to be burned alive before him as a sacrifice to a local idol! – much to the horror of the faithful...

Here is a modern example: Suppose a skinny boy is being picked on during school recess by a big bully. Two classmates of the skinny boy suggest that together, they stand up to the bully. Instead, the skinny boy tries to get on the bully's good side. The skinny boy ends up being the bully's slave, and has to turn over all his allowance to big bully, so the skinny boy is always poor. He didn't listen to his friends; even worse, the skinny boy in the school yard doesn't turn to an adult who can dispense justice. Because the skinny kid is trying to do it all by his own efforts, without getting the help he needs from the one who can make all things right, the skinny boy just makes it far worse for everyone... Do we get the idea? By the time Isaiah the prophet comes along in the 8th century B.C., the land of Judah is in a *mess* – politically, socially, and economically. But the root of all their problems was that Ahaz the King, and his palace officials, are in over their heads! They aren't seeking God's wisdom... It's not even clear they believe that the God of their ancestors cares about human affairs...

So, in light of all this political unrest, the prophet Isaiah with great courage goes to face King Ahaz. "Ahaz," says Isaiah, "you're making the people weary. You're even making God weary! Don't be frightened of these 2 kings." And then Isaiah says a strange thing: "A young woman, a virgin, is going to give birth to a very significant baby boy. This baby boy is going to have a very special name: Emmanuel." King Ahaz would have known that this special name, Emmanuel, means, "God is with us." By the time this special child grows up, the enemies of whom King Ahaz is so frightened will be long gone... Isaiah hints that, with the birth of this special baby Emmanuel, a new era will begin...

The Jewish teachers who read this prophecy were puzzled by it. When Christians read this passage, the answer seems obvious: The ancient prophet Isaiah had a glimpse of the incarnation of God as Jesus of Nazareth. His mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary, is the bearer of Emmanuel. A new era has begun with his reign...

Matthew begins his biography like this:

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. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel',
which means, 'God is with us.'

The significance of the birth which Isaiah prophesied is that God is with us – a new era has begun – with the conception and birth of Jesus.

Isaiah was not a Christian. Yet somehow, Isaiah heard “rumours of glory,” which have become part of the canon of holy scripture. God was at work in this faithful man, who lived in a troubled time, to point ahead to the coming birth we can all celebrate, as God is with us...

You and I live in a troubled time too. But in this season, you and I are invited to celebrate the birth of the Christ-child, born of blessed Mary, in whom a new era has begun. May we represent our Saviour well. This season, the world is hearing of rumours of glory. May we shine for Christ, so that all might believe.

Amen.