"Love, the Lord is on the Way: Imagining a New World with Isaiah,"
by Ellen Williams Hensle, 12/21/25

I think it's safe to say that the prophet Isaiah would be surprised to find himself quoted in the Gospel of Matthew. For one thing, Isaiah was addressing the king of his nation, the tiny country of Judah, in regards to near future events – things that would happen in a matter of two or three years, the amount of time it takes a pregnant woman to give birth and wean her child fully onto solid food. So nearly 800 years later, to see himself quoted as predicting the miraculous birth of a child – not really what Isaiah was thinking when he spoke these words to King Ahaz.

And the context – Isaiah was not speaking about the Messiah when he uttered these words. Rather he was trying to help his king out of a geopolitical tight spot. The army of the mighty Assyrian Empire was threatening Judah's neighbors to the north, the similarly small countries of Israel and Damascus. In turn, Israel and Damascus were trying to convince Judah to enter into an alliance with them, and they were willing to use force to do it. Troops from the north were headed for Jerusalem, to lay siege to the city. King Ahaz was feeling the pressure – how long would the siege last? Would the city be able to survive? Should he appeal to the Assyrian king for aid?

So God sends the prophet Isaiah to speak to the king. "You don't need to enter an alliance with Israel and Damascus," Isaiah says to Ahaz. "Nor do you need to call on Assyria for assistance. All you need to do is wait – all you need to do is wait and trust in God. See this pregnant young woman here? Before her child is eating solids, all this will be over. The siege will be over, the Assyrians will have wiped out Israel and Judah, and you'll be enjoying the fruits of the land, the milk and honey God promised to your ancestors. Just be patient. Just wait for God to take care of this.

"And this child to be born, this child who serves as a sign will remind you of God's promises. Every time you call out to him as he runs through the palace halls, you will say out loud, Immanuel, God-is-with-us. And so every time you call out to him you will be reminded that God is faithful. God is present. Even though you and your nation are in the midst of a crisis, that does not mean that God has abandoned you. No, God has promised to be with you – always. You can stop worrying, stop playing out every what-if scenario in your head. Put down the pen you've taken up to prostrate yourself before the King of Assyria. Look at the child growing within his mother's womb and remember: God is with you. God is with the people God has chosen."

So yeah, I think Isaiah would be surprised to find himself quoted, generations later, as proof of God's plan for a virgin to conceive the Messiah – if for no other reason than Isaiah was talking about a woman present in the king's throne room, a woman currently pregnant, presumably by the normal method and not some miraculous immaculate conception. But the version of Isaiah's prophecy that Matthew read was a Greek translation known as the Septuagint, and this translation had somewhat dubiously rendered "the young woman is with child" as "the virgin shall conceive." From "young woman" in general to "virgin" specifically, from pregnant present tense to a promised conception, scholars agree that the Greek translation got this one wrong, in more ways than one.

But you can see why Matthew jumped on this verse. He was concerned to show the connection between the Scriptures he loved and the Savior he had come to follow. As far as we can tell, Matthew was Jewish, and he wrote his account of Jesus's life and work for an audience that shared his religion. In his gospel he strove to demonstrate deep ties between God's presence with God's people in the past and God's presence with the people in his own present time, God's promises fulfilled through the abiding presence of the risen Savior, Jesus Christ.

With our modern understanding of Scripture, seeing Jesus's birth to the virgin Mary as a fulfillment of Isaiah's words of assurance to King Ahaz is a bit of a stretch. But Joseph's situation does bear a certain resemblance to King Ahaz's situation. Joseph too is asked by a divine messenger to pause his planned course of action and let things play out. Joseph too is asked to trust God and wait for God to deliver the people.

Of course Joseph has never been anywhere near a royal throne room. He is an ordinary man in an ordinary town, living an ordinary life. In the painting on your bulletin cover, Gerard Seghers shows Joseph's ordinariness through his clothing – he is dressed in the everyday attire of a working Flemish person of Seghers's day, with a rough-hewn walking stick and a well-worn hat resting near the chair where he has fallen asleep. Joseph leads the ordinary life of a faithful Jewish person – that is until the woman to whom he is engaged turns up unexpectedly pregnant. He is within his rights to divorce her, though with a tender heart he plans to do so quietly, to avoid bringing shame on her and her family.

But just as he has decided on his course of action, a divine messenger appears to him in a dream. Like Isaiah telling King Ahaz not to follow through on his plan to appeal to the Assyrian king for help, the angel tells Joseph not to follow through on his plan to divorce Mary. For everything that is happening to them is from the Holy Spirit, the angel says. This child to be born is a special one – one sent from God, one who will save the people from their sins. Just hold on, the angel tells Joseph. God is with you. God is at work here. Pause your plan and put your trust in the Lord.

It would have been a risk for King Ahaz to trust Isaiah's message and leave his situation up to God. As a king he was responsible for the safety of his kingdom. He also had a reputation to uphold. Appear to be doing nothing while his neighbors-turned-enemies were on their way to lay siege to his capital, with the Assyrians hot on their heels? A political risk. And possibly a risk to his own life too, if things didn't play out as God had promised. And for Joseph, to marry a pregnant woman – a risk to his own good name. A risk to his and Mary's reputation in their community once married. What if the dream was just that – a dream? Should he trust that this message was really from God? Should he follow the angel's instructions?

In the end, Ahaz and Joseph respond differently to God's invitation to trust. Ahaz decides to ignore Isaiah and appeal to Assyria, and while he temporarily averts the destruction of Jerusalem, he ends up in the empire's debt, much to the disappointment of his people, not to mention the frustration of his God. The history books of the Bible remember Ahaz as weak and unfaithful. Joseph, though – Joseph takes the risk. When he awakes, he does as the angel of the Lord commanded him in the dream: he takes Mary as his wife and names her child Jesus, which means "the LORD saves."

So too God calls to us across the ages – we are called to listen for God's voice, to trust that God is at work, to wait patiently for the Lord to act. This is not a call to blind faith – in the words of a much-beloved Presbyterian college chaplain, "God gave us brains and expects us to use them." Rather this call is a call to remember – to welcome once again the child named Immanuel, God-is-with-us, and to remember. To remember that God *has been* with us – to affirm that God *is* with us – to believe that God *will be* with us. No matter what we face, in our individual lives, in the life of our church community, in the life of the world around us – God is with us. We are invited to pause our busy lives, pause our human striving and strategizing, pause the race of our anxious thoughts – we are invited to pause and listen. Pause and look around for signs that our God is indeed with us, Immanuel is indeed in our midst. And then, with Ahaz and with Joseph, we are invited to take the risk of following God's way instead of our way.

On Thursday morning, Laura Brobyn wrote "Love from Chestnut Hill Presbyterian" on a paper table cloth and draped it over a table at West Kensington Ministry. Then she loaded the table up with toys she had collected. As far as I understand the situation, Laura had told a few friends that she was doing a food drive for our friends at West Kensington – except somehow they heard "toys" instead of "food" and filled her car with about 100 items, from jump ropes and blocks to dolls and action figures. So Laura took the toys to West Kensington's usual Thursday food distribution, and in addition to picking fresh fruits and vegetables, neighbors could pick toys for the kids in their lives, just in time for the holidays.

Laura sent the Social Witness Committee a few pictures from the event, including one of a nativity that kids at the Ministry had made, "mostly from paper products," as Laura put it. Right now is one of the few times I wish we had a projector in here so I could show you the photo. But looking carefully at the picture, you can see that the traditional stable is made from one of the boxes that those weekly donations of fruit and veggies come in. The stable's straw is a pile of shredded paper packing material. Mary and Joseph are constructed out of popsicle sticks and tissues, and an angel with a pipe cleaner halo is lofted off the ground by two clothespins. The animals waiting near the baby Jesus are a water bottle and a toilet paper tube wrapped in tissues. And a small toy makes baby Jesus himself, lying in a manger made of toilet paper and masking tape.

While the manger made of paper products may not be the fanciest nativity scene you ever saw, it is a fitting nativity scene. Because Immanuel, God-with-us – he came to ordinary people leading ordinary lives. He joined the fullness of God's presence to the fullness of our humanity, as broken and in need of healing as we are. He came not in the splendor of a palace but into the mundane messiness of our most human moments – moments that call for tissues and clothespins and fruit boxes and even toilet paper. And there Immanuel, God-with-us, can still be found, in the midst of our everyday lives, whether we are full of joy or deep in crisis. There Immanuel, God-with-us, can still be found, inviting us to pause, to look for him, and then to risk our human plans for love – the love with which he first loved us.