

RUF Bible Study – Attributes of God in Isaiah
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Isaiah 7, 9 and 11 – The Promised Presence of God

Isaiah 7:10 Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, *11* “Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” *12* But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.” *13* And he said, “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? *14* Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

Isaiah 9: *6* For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 11: *1* There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. *2* And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. *3* And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, *4* but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. *5* Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins... *10* In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.

For centuries, the prophecy had floated around, but no one knew exactly what it meant. A boy will be born from a virgin in an obscure land. This child will have strong and special powers. He would grow strong and defeat evil, restore good and set things right again. But who was he?

Anakin Skywalker.² My sons, Cal and Drew, know all about this. They have studied the books, and can answer practically any Star Wars question. I’m not sure exactly how valuable this knowledge is, but the world of Anakin and Star Wars might point to someone else.

Of course, or we wouldn’t study it here. We’re looking at these three Isaiah texts together to see if they have anything to say to us. And what this really is is a Christmas message. In February. That seems odd, since we’ve long passed the season of advent and its festivities. But that very well may be the perfect time for you to hear about the meaning of Christmas. You don’t have to buy any presents. You don’t have to go to any parties. You don’t have to hear about baby Jesus in a manger and roll your eyes.

But do you understand Christmas? Think about what you hear is the meaning of Christmas. Christmas is about love. About giving. About making the world a better place. About goodness. In effect, we hear that Christmas is like the 1985 We are the World title track – “We are the world, we are the people. We are the ones who make a better day, so let’s start giving.”

Is that true? Does that inspire you? Now, in February, are you still motivated by that spirit of Christmas?

Let’s see if these texts can help us discover the true meaning of Christmas, for I think it’s discovery, not development, that we’re after.

Isaiah 7 – A Child Born of a Virgin

The context of Isaiah 7 is what we’ve been discussing for all of the book of Isaiah. King Ahaz is afraid of all the nations around him, so he began making treaties. Sister country Judah had been routed, and now the armies were coming for Jerusalem. Ahaz is shaking. Where is he to turn?

Isaiah, the prophet comes to King Ahaz and tells brings with him his son, Shear-jashub, whose name means “A remnant will remain.” God is telling Ahaz, “You won’t be completely wiped out. Trust me. Follow me. Have faith.” Now, we have to admit that this also implies a bad turn, a judgment of sorts, but with goodness in the end. “Ahaz, stand firm!”

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For this series, I used commentaries on Isaiah from Meyer, Webb, Ortlund, Oswalt and Motyer. I listened to sermons from Tim Keller, Fred Harrell and Bryan Chapell, and used notes from RUF campus minister Kevin Twit and seminary professor Dr. Jack Collins. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

² In Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace a young junkyard slave, Anakin Skywalker, is discovered by Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn and his padawan, Obi Wan Kenobi, who (mainly Qui-Gon) believes him to be the "Chosen One" who is prophesied to bring balance to the Force and destroy the Sith. Qui-Gon Jinn is convinced on this fact when Anakin's mother reveals to him that Anakin has no father and was possibly conceived by the Force itself. This fact explains why Anakin has the highest midi-chlorian count of any lifeform. Also, the coming of the Sith'ari, an ancient Sith prophecy, became somewhat well known in Darth Revan's Sith Empire. The Sith'ari was said to be a perfect (according to the Sith philosophy) being who would rise to power and bring balance to the Force. According to prophecy, the Sith'ari would rise up and destroy the Sith, but in the process would return to lead the Sith and make them stronger than ever before. It is believed that the prophecy of the Sith Sith'ari and the prophecies of the Jedi Chosen One refer to the same individual; namely Anakin Skywalker/Darth Vader, who made the Sith stronger than ever by wiping out the Jedi Knights and assisting Darth Sidious in his rise to power, but then destroyed the Sith when he betrayed and killed Sidious, sacrificing himself in the process, thus fulfilling the ancient prophecy of the Sith'ari.

From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Messiahs_in_fiction_and_fantasy#Star_Wars

What would you do?

Isaiah tells Ahaz to ask for a sign to reassure him. In 7:11, we read, “Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” God tells Ahaz to ask for a sign.

Don’t you think that Ahaz should ask for a sign now that God has told him to do so? But Ahaz, dripping, pious, super spiritual, falls into a sort of church-talk babble. *But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test.”* The Bible does say, You should not put the Lord your God to the test. But that is thrown out the window when God tells you to ask for a sign. There are signs that come from unbelief and signs that come from belief. When God tells you to look for a sign, you should.

But Ahaz wants to stay in control. If he lets God in he’ll lose control.

God through Isaiah gets mad and tells Ahaz, “You’re going to get a sign anyway.” In the midst of judgment, you will get a miraculous conception. And this child will come into a desolate god-forsaken place.

The result of this is that Ahaz’s expected liberator became his certain executioner. This could be the turning point for the house of David. The Davidic line never returned to its former glory. Ahaz became a groveling puppet king and was succeeded by others just like him, excepting Hezekiah, who was one of the very last good kings.

Ahaz chose not to trust God. “To a casual onlooker he made it appear that he did not have a problem of too little faith, but rather was possessed of such deep faith that he did not want to ask for evidence.”³

Here we have the Ahaz question – will you look for the signs God gives you? Is your mind already made up as to how God will save? Do you have it already decided how the world works or can God intervene with you? What are you basing your assurance on, what is your belief resting upon?

“Will he respond by believing God and becoming established, or will he instead reject such belief? Isaiah challenges him to seek evidence that the exclusive trust he is recommending is indeed viable. But Ahaz does not want such evidence? Why? Apparently his mind is already made up. He is going to trust his and his nation’s fate to Assyria, and he does not want some (trumped up?) evidence that such a drastic decision is unwarranted. Any sign provided by Isaiah could be an embarrassment to him, so he attempts to avoid the dilemma by an appeal to piety. So it always is. Evidence cannot create faith, it can only confirm it. Where there is not faith, evidence is merely unwelcome, something which needs to be explained away.”⁴

You have to admit that it sounds pretty unbelievable that a virgin would give birth. In our day, with in vitro fertilization and other technologies, it is certainly possible. But in 750 B.C.? A virgin? Isn’t that so impossible that the text must say something else?

It is true that the word translated “virgin” can also mean “young woman.” It is ambiguous and there is a specific word for “virgin” that could have been used. This is the ambiguous term “*alma*” instead of the unambiguous “*betula*.” “*Alma*” means “a young woman of marriageable age,” but the term is never used of married women in the Old Testament. So the word denotes a sexually mature, but unmarried, young woman, which is axiomatic in the Hebrew society to mean a virgin. “Maiden” gets at it well. And the ambiguous nature of a sign is part and parcel with prophecies, isn’t it?

How was this fulfilled in Ahaz’s time? Maher Shalal Hash Baz (whose name means “the spoil speeds, the prey hastens”) is the most likely candidate, pointing to the ultimate Immanuel. But that’s just it. Maher Shalal Hash Baz can fulfill this but not all the way. Was he born of a virgin or a young girl? Is he Immanuel, God with us? Perhaps partially, but we are right to wonder if not entirely. We should be looking for someone who will be called Immanuel, God with us. And this person, this child, will be born of a virgin. Both of those, if they were to happen, would be astounding.

Isaiah 9- Will Be the Ideal Ruler

As I’ve read about and studied King Henry VIII, I’m not sure I can come with a more conflicted, confusing and creative king. I’m tempted to say that there has been none worse, but that’s not true. There have been worse. Henry’s problem wasn’t tyrannical per se, but that he was so human and had so much power to carry out his every desire. That would probably destroy anyone. He managed to set England in a fairly good position because of his advisors around him, but he used every possible strategy at his disposal to accomplish his own desires.

I want a special papal dispensation to marry my brother’s wife. Granted. Okay, now I want a special dispensation to annul the marriage and divorce her since she hasn’t produced an heir. I will create my own church so that I can do this and marry the woman I want. I will cut off her head. And marry again and again and again.

I’m sure by the end of Henry’s life, whenever a statement went out from the King’s chambers, everyone rolled their eyes. He was truly unbelievable.

Sounds a little like, “I am not a crook,” or “I did not have sexual relations with that woman,” or “There are weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.”

As Americans, we don’t like kings. It’s in our blood, our psyche not to like them. Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

But... What if? What if the king were right and good and true and pure and honorable and virtuous? Wouldn’t that be good?

Chapter 9 of Isaiah begins with the word “But.” In the NIV translation, we read, “Nevertheless.” If you read chapter 8, you’ll see, along with much of the first part of the book to this point, that the world is a bad place.

³ Oswalt, 206

⁴ Oswalt, 203

You knew that didn't you? Girls are put into prostitution at 9 years old. They are abused all over the world. I'll bet some of you have been abused or raped. If so, you should talk about it. Please talk about it. People are taken advantage of financially and economically. People are caught in situations they cannot get out of. Ethnic cleansing is a reality in our world today, in 2006. We have nuclear weapons all around. A cartoon can ignite a firestorm across the world. And on and on.

Nevertheless....

Do you believe in a nevertheless? Do you have some sort of hope? What is that hope placed in today? Where does that hope rest? That we can make a better world, just you and me? That was sung 20 years ago, and has it happened?

The Nevertheless Moment tells us that our way leads to darkness but his way leads to light. "This oracle of salvation is clearly the climax of the whole movement from darkness to light in 8:1-9:7. At the same time it represents the final reversal of the situation in chapter 7 where the Davidic house, represented by Ahaz, was rejected."⁵ "The dependence on our own resources and perspectives can only lead further into the darkness. That had been the way of Ahaz, refusing the instructions and testimonies of God. But into the helplessness of that darkness, God would, through the coming King, yet shine the light of his own delivering power."⁶

You see, Christianity is extremely realistic. It doesn't say that the world is a great place and you just have to see it that way. It doesn't say that if we'd only all get together, goodness would come out of us and we'd have restoration. It says, This world is broken, sinful and crappy – we need a ruler to guide us and show us the way.

Isaiah 9 shows us "in the place of an unfaithful monarch whose shortsighted defensive policies will actually plunge the nation into more desperate straits, there is lifted up the ideal monarch who, though a child, will bring an end to all wars and establish an eternal kingdom based upon justice and righteousness. As a child, he is the culmination of Isaiah's use of children to indicate God's providential mastery of history."⁷

In other words, there will be a king, but he's not what you'll expect. "The outworking of God's purposed in history through the whole of chapters 7-9 is associated with (either figuratively or literally) the birth of children. Truly his strength is made perfect in weakness."⁸

So we're going to have a child king. And it keeps getting more far-fetched. For in Isaiah 9:1, we read that this king will come from Galilee. This is like saying someone will come from the panhandle of Oklahoma, and from a city like Nazareth is like saying he's from Guymon. People don't come from there. Nothing good comes from Stillwater, right? Things happen in the big city. But this child will be from the backwaters, the least likely place.

But, and this is really weird, this child from the region of Galilee will be God, for the language can only apply to one who is God incarnate. God with us. Immanuel. "First, it emphasized that the divine ruler will not merely be God, but although partaking of the divine attributes, will have the most human of all arrivals upon the earth, namely, birth. The expected perfect king will be human and divine. But the language makes another point. This point underlines the central paradox in Isaiah's conception of Yahweh's deliverance of his people. How will God deliver from arrogance, war, oppression and coercion? By being more arrogant, more warlike, more oppressive, and more coercive? Surely the book of Isaiah indicates frequently that God was powerful enough to destroy his enemies in an instant, yet again and again, when the prophet comes to the heart of the means of deliverance, a childlike face peers out at us. God is strong enough to overcome his enemies by becoming vulnerable, transparent, and humble – the only hope, in fact, for turning enmity into friendship.

It is common in the Near East to have titles of kingship, such as Mighty Bull appearing in Thebes and Enduring in Kingship, like Re in Heaven – but these are abnormal. These are divine in a different way. And what we have here is not a coronation hymn but a birth announcement. Somehow a virgin born child would demonstrate that God is with us. This child will have those traits which manifest the presence of God in our midst.

We're looking for a *Wonderful Counselor*⁹ – or "wonder of a counselor." The word "wonder" suggests something supernatural, beyond human comprehension, but in any case, the folly of human wisdom is derided because the coming one will give wondrous counsel, unfailling in the depth of its wisdom. For it is true wisdom which knows that in wisdom is strength, in surrender is victory, and in death is life. (John 12:24-26)

We're looking for a *Mighty God* – Great Hero. This term always refers to God (Deut. 10:17, Jer. 32:18). This is a title of Yahweh. It's not really, "a mighty God," but more "the one and only mighty God." The king will have God's true might about him, power so great that it can absorb all the evil which can be hurled at it until none is left o hurl.

We're looking for an *Everlasting Father* – forever fatherhood. Is this just typical Near Eastern bombast? No, this is never found in Israel writing for its kings. God's fatherhood doesn't impose itself upon his children, but it sacrifices for them. (Romans 8:15-17, Luke 23:34)

We're looking for a *Prince of Peace* – someone who comes in peace and establishes peace, not by a brutal squashing of all defiance, but by means of a transparent vulnerability which makes defiance pointless. Somehow through him will come the reconciliation between God and man that will then make possible reconciliation between man and God. (Luke 2:14, John 16:33, Romans 5:1, Hebr. 12:14).

⁵ Webb, 68

⁶ Oswalt, 242

⁷ Oswalt, 241

⁸ Webb, 68-69

⁹ From Oswalt, 247-248 and Dr. Collins' notes on this passage

Do you need counseling? Do you need a hero? Do you need a father? Do you need peace? Do you need a light? Isaiah 9:2 says, “*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.*”

I know you need these things; you need light shined into your dark places. So do I. Where can we get these things? Isaiah 9:3 says that there will be an increase in joy. How could light, joy, a wonderful counselor, a mighty God, an everlasting father and a prince of peace ever occur in one person, however great he might be? I mean even if we had all these things, this person can't live forever and then we're stuck all over again. This is one of the recurrent themes of Jewish history, in fact all of history – just when you get a great leader with all of his power and wisdom focused together, he dies – and then the person next in line screws it all up.

A child born of a virgin will be the ideal ruler...
Let's look at Isaiah 11 to see if it helps.

Isaiah 11- Who Will Be the Root of Jesse

Isaiah 11 reads like a Serven home maintenance project. I've cut down several trees at our house¹⁰, but still have stumps in the ground that I want out. I've considered a stump grinder, but am afraid of the expense and expertise it takes, considering my track record for home improvement projects. In the meantime, I have to clip off the little saplings that want to grow out of the stumps. I don't like stumps.

Isaiah 11 tells me that I'm right. When the tree has been cut down, the stump is left as a reminder of what used to be there. Stumpy isn't a flattering name. The dynasty of David is in disarray, in disaster. What used to be glorious and in full bloom is now cut down and rendered as nothing. A stump ready to be ground up.

Again we have the honest picture that Christianity brings us. David was a great king. And a great screw up. He left a very mixed legacy of brokenness in his family. And now here we are with Ahaz a few chapters before, sealing the fate of the people of God into slavery.

It makes me think of what Lewis writes about Narnia in the beginning of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*: “It's always winter and never Christmas.” That's what our lives feel like. We're back to that picture of darkness, again.

I was talking with someone recently who was lamenting the fact that we're in the middle of February, which is the dreariest month. Christmas is over, Spring is still a ways away. It's cold and dark most of the day. February is the Tuesday of months. Not even close yet to the weekend.

Are you feeling February? Stumpy isn't the best nickname you could have. Israel and the line of David are now called Stumpy.

If so, then you need to hope for a shoot from the stump, just like Israel always did. There will be another David someday soon, another ruler who will set everything right... Right...? Oh, I wish it could be true. But you know what happens to shoots – I come along and clip them off or spray them so they never come back. They don't make it. You want another messiah? Another king? Do you really think it will save you? You'll just say to me, I've tried those and they don't work. And, do you know what? You are right to be cynical.

And yet, think about this – in our stump-like lives why is it so difficult to utterly and completely extinguish hope? Why do we hope for a shoot at all? Isn't it more real and honest to behave like the existentialists and nihilists and give up all hope?

No, I don't think so. I think you can't turn off your hope because of the way you've been designed by God. You were built for more. It's just that you don't know what it is yet.

It's not another shoot you need. Shoots come and go. They are anything temporary that you can put your hope in. But there is something else. 11:10 tells us it will be a *shoot* that comes from the *root*.

It's not just another messiah/king. It's not just another way for us to repair ourselves and have personal peace and affluence. No, instead, as we read on in chapter 11, the whole world will be radically healed by this kingdom. Everything made right. The root of Jesse brings this about. Not the offspring of Jesse, but the author of Jesse.

Who or what is the root of Jesse? This has God himself! He is the author of Jesse, David and of you. There is no reason to hope in the shoot if it's just another shoot. But if the shoot is the root, then we have something. If God breaks through and walks among us, then we have a reason to hope.

Okay, so that's great. According to Isaiah, we're looking for a child born of a virgin who will be the ideal ruler and the root of Jesse. I have to be honest here, Doug – who is that? What is that?

Let's look again at the Christmas story for our Advent message tonight in the middle of February.

Working backwards from our outline, can we see that Jesus not only was from the line of Jesse but was in fact the root of Jesse? Matthew 1 gives Jesus' genealogy, tracing it back, yes, to David and Jesse. He is from the right line. That is provable.

What is more, John 1 tells us that Jesus is the Word of God, with God from the very beginning. That he made everything and nothing was made without him. That is the root of Jesse. But I cannot prove this to you. You have to believe it or not.

Do you believe that Jesus is God? Do you think that he is the Word made flesh, the second person of the Trinity, fully man and fully God? That is a huge idea, one that has enormous implications in your life if it might be true. That should fill you with all sorts of ideas and joy. That should affect you in all kinds of ways. It should mean that you have a rootedness that no one can take away from you. Do you believe it?

¹⁰ I have a nick in one of my baseball caps I was wearing when the chain saw caught and kicked back. That's not good.

Next, is Jesus the ideal ruler?

The Westminster Larger Catechism states that Jesus fulfilled the offices of prophet, priest and king. To answer how, it asks this question: Q. 45. How doth Christ execute the office of a king?

A. Christ executeth the office of a king, in calling out of the world a people to himself, and giving them officers, laws, and censures, by which he visibly governs them; in bestowing saving grace upon his elect, rewarding their obedience, and correcting them for their sins, preserving and supporting them under all their temptations and sufferings, restraining and overcoming all their enemies, and powerfully ordering all things for his own glory, and their good; and also in taking vengeance on the rest, who know not God, and obey not the gospel.

This long sentence of Christ's kingship is backed up by these verses: *Acts 15:14-16*. Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up. *Genesis 49:10*. The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be. *Psalms 110:3*. Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power, in the beauties of holiness from the womb of the morning: thou hast the dew of thy youth.

Ephesians 4:11-12. And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ. *1 Corinthians 12:28*. And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.

Isaiah 33:22. For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; he will save us.

Matthew 18:17-18. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. *1 Corinthians 5:4-5*. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

Acts 5:31. Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.

Revelation 22:12. And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be. *Revelation 2:10*. Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.

Revelation 3:19. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent.

Isaiah 63:9. In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them: in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; and he bare them, and carried them all the days of old.

1 Corinthians 15:25. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. *Psalms 110:1-2*. The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool. The LORD shall send the rod of thy strength out of Zion: rule thou in the midst of thine enemies.

Romans 14:10-11. But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.

Romans 8:28. And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

2 Thessalonians 1:8-9. In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power. *Psalms 2:8-9*. Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession. Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.

Working through those texts would surely be helpful, but if you look through the gospels, you will discover that the writers took great pains to show that Jesus was indeed a king. Unorthodox for sure. Surprising. Not what the people either expected or wanted, but a king nonetheless.

To be explicit, in John 18, we read this account: *So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" 34 Jesus answered, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" 35 Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?" 36 Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world." 37 Then Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice." 38 Pilate said to him, "What is truth?"*

Again in John 19, we read: *So they took Jesus, 17 and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called the place of a skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha. 18 There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them. 19 Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." 20 Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek. 21 So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but rather, 'This man said, I am King of the Jews.'" 22 Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written."*

Jesus is told to us to be the king and he is ideal in the sense that he comes to set things right, to be a counselor, a mighty God, a prince of peace, an everlasting father.

Do you believe that Jesus is your king? Thomas Watson has written, "Many would have Christ for their Savior, but not their Prince; such as will not have Christ to be their King to rule over them, shall never have his blood to save them." Do you joyfully submit to Jesus Christ as your prince, as your Lord? Does this affect your time, your money, your studies, your body, your mind, your heart, your plans in any way? What would it mean if Jesus really were treated as the king he is?

But how can you believe all of this? Isn't there some sort of sign? Yes. He will be born of a virgin.

Matthew 1:18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. *19* And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. *20* But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in

her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”
22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

23 “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel”

(which means, God with us). 24 When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, 25 but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

You saw Isaiah 7 right there in the text, right? Matthew thinks that this applies to Jesus, that his mother, Mary, was a virgin and that this fulfills the Isaiah 7 prophecy.

Friends, the most important question tonight is to ask and possibly answer “Who was, who is Jesus Christ?” Some of you want to ask “What does Christianity say about x?” Abortion. Politics. The death penalty. Homeschooling. Gambling. New Orleans. Jessica Simposon.

But you have to see that that in fact is not the question. The question is Who is Jesus? It’s really not easy to answer. Just imagine what it would have been like to be Joseph. You find out that your fiancé is pregnant – and you’re not the father. Who is the father? Uh... God is. Right.

He hears all this stuff and then he gets the prophecy from Isaiah 7. *This* is the one? It’s hardly believable. The faith and trust of this young couple is absolutely unbelievable. Despair, desperation, marginalized, confused, having a child out of wedlock. 9 months of explanations. But God tells him to have faith. He doesn’t give him a 25-page explanation of how this is going to work out. He says, All you need to know is that I will be with you. Trust me.

But, I will be with you.

This is truly a nevertheless moment. I mean, it is both light in the darkness and not what you’d expect. Would you expect God to be born as a child, born in the dinkiest cities, born to the poorest of parents, born in a cattle stall, born in a feed trough, born with only shepherds around? It really isn’t very likely, or very distinguished, or very celebratory. It really is sort of common, dirty and dark. Stables are smelly places. They’re full of stinky animals. It’s really rather humbling.

Christmas is about God with us coming into the darkness in this humbling nevertheless moment because we cannot save ourselves. The real crisis is soul-killing, world-killing sin and its destruction and lack of a desire for God. But God says, in just that situation, I’ve come to do something about it. Trust me with your life.

Can you do that? Can you believe this sign is real, true, accurate? We all have Ahaz scenarios because we are good at taking matters into our own hands. God says trust me. But the ones who were at Jesus’ birthday party were the shepherds, the least likely people to witness the birth of a king. If you are to come to Christ, you have to be the same. You have to come to him on your knees, acknowledging your unlikelihood to be loved, accepted, honored and cherished. If you come to him demanding those things because you deserve it, then you do not know him and will not be admitted.

I want to acknowledge to you that following Christ is scary. It’s like learning how to ride a bike. I’ve taught three of my kids to ride a two-wheeler, the most recent of which was Drew last fall. I had hoped that Russ would teach him while he was here, but he either didn’t make time or he chickened out, I’m not sure which one.

The trouble with teaching your kids to ride a bike is that you know you are right, and they know you are wrong. And you have a tremendously difficult time remembering back that far to feel what it was like to do this for the first time. Even if you could remember, it is so hard to explain.

The kid can see his brother and sister riding their bikes. But he also can see that if he lifts his legs right there, the bike will fall over. Somehow, staying up means moving, and that is petrifying.

Drew had to take off the training wheels and trust the design of the bike. He had to trust me when I told him to pedal and steer and it will be okay even if he falls sometimes. He had to humble himself to say that his knowledge of the world wasn’t all there was, to admit that someone wiser might know more, contrary to his emotions.

It feels so much safer to have his legs down on the ground than to pick them up. But there is so much more freedom when he trusts and does it. He’ll fly with freedom. He will smile. It’s impossible not to smile.

There are areas of our life where we think we have to take matters into our own hands, aren’t there? We’re tired of waiting. We’re not sure how its going to turn out. We have Ahaz moments, Ahaz decisions, Ahaz scenarios.

Some of you are married, and you’re starting to say, This is way harder than I thought. I’ve tried everything. I want out. I’m not trusting you any more God, I don’t think that there is any part of this that could be redemptive.

Some of you desperately want to be married. Or just be in a relationship. Or to have been asked out for Valentine’s Day weekend. You want a Relationship. You’re thinking, If I could just have that right person and get married then everything will be right. But you’re tired of waiting. So you lower your standards, and take whoever comes along. Even for just a little while.

Someday, after you’ve gotten your job or your house or your kids – you know, the things you’ve always thought if you just had them, that you’d be really happy – you’ll find yourself awash with disappointment. Or bitterness. Or self pity. Or cynicism.

Those are Ahaz moments. Those are fake kings and rulers in your lives that you’ve tried to serve. Those are shoots that are only approximating the real thing.

But you’re saying, How can I do this? How can I trust him? How can I humble myself like this and worship this king?

Jesus’ story – his life, death and resurrection all point to him being THE Immanuel. God with us. That’s what Christmas means. It’s Christmas in February. Not that you will create some sort of goodness or light out of your life, but that there is goodness and light outside of you and his name is Jesus. Jesus is God. God among us. In the midst of all of our despair, God has broken through and walked among us. Stake your life on this. Lean not on your own understanding.

The Bible claims this. Jesus claims this. His followers believed this – that is really, really unlikely. The least likely people to believe this did so. Why?

Our February Christmas question is Who is Jesus?

If he really is God among us, then you need to give yourself to him and all he has for you to do.

If you aren't sure, then you need to study and pursue this with all your heart. Do you have joy today? Do people get joy and hope when they're around you? Some of you are just trying to survive college, but there is more possible for you? You can take this rooted joy and hope and give it to others and help change the University of Oklahoma.

Perhaps for the first time tonight you can believe in the light, receive the light. Perhaps again, for you have forgotten out of pride or unbelief or selfishness or despair.

He has given you signs – will you believe them or not? If Jesus is really born of a virgin, it might be true that he is Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace – it just might be true that he is God. That John 1 is true. Wouldn't that be great if it were true? Wouldn't that make more sense than the random firings of the synapses in your brain causing these jumpings in your heart?

Will you take your feet off the ground and begin to experience freedom or keep the training wheels on? This is the nature of faith and belief.

There is a child born of virgin who is the ideal ruler from the root of Jesse. His name is Jesus of Nazareth. Come to him.

Appendix on Isaiah 7:14

In a college community, I feel obligated to attach this discussion from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virgin_birth

In the past two millennia, there has been considerable controversy among Christians and their opponents about the plain translation and the precise meaning of a small section of Isaiah. For many scholars, the crux of the matter is the translation of the word : המלע, `almah which has been translated as *young woman* and as *virgin*.

In the King James Bible, a traditional Protestant translation, the verses in question run like this: 7:14 Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a *virgin* shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. 15 Butter and honey shall he eat, that he may know to refuse the evil, and choose the good. 16 For before the child shall know to refuse the evil, and choose the good, the land that thou abhorrest shall be forsaken of both her kings.

Many modern translations concede that the word in the Hebrew does not mean "virgin".

The Revised Standard Version says: Behold a *young woman* shall conceive...

The New Jerusalem Bible says: the *young woman* is with child

The Revised English Bible says: A *young woman* is with child

The Good News Bible says: a *young woman* who is pregnant

The New Revised Standard Version says: the *young woman* is with child

This demonstrates that many Christian scholars, both Protestant and Catholic, agree that the traditional translation of the Hebrew is not preferred in the context of Isaiah 7:14.

Skeptics argue that this is not a very clear prophecy of the birth of Jesus Christ. For example, what does the "butter and honey" refer to? (One possible response to the "butter and honey" problem: it is a reference to one who, metaphorically, "has eaten good meat his entire life in order to spit out the bad meat if it ever touched his lips". Note that the "butter and honey" reference is immediately followed by the comment on an ability to choose between good and evil; this may suggest that they are related.) And why is Christ, who was sinless from birth in the traditional Christian understanding, described as having to learn to refuse the evil and choose the good? Skeptics raise even greater questions about the translation of the first verse in this passage:

7:14 Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, המלע (a `almah) shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

Christian apologists respond that the passage is a *double reference*— a sign both to Ahaz that the alliance against him would be destroyed, and to the house of David as a whole that was threatened with extinction. This is shown by the Hebrew which uses "singular you" for the former and

"plural you' for the latter. With the former, Isaiah reassures Ahaz that the alliance would be destroyed before his own son Shear Jashub, who was present (v. 3), would "learn to refuse the evil and choose the good".

Greek translation

Is it accurate to translate המלע (*`almah*) as *virgin*? The Greek version of the Book of Isaiah 7:14 (see below and the articles on Biblical canon, Tanakh, Septuagint and Old Testament) translates המלע (*`almah*) as *parthenos*. *Parthenos* is conventionally translated into English as *virgin*. Furthermore, the Gospel of Matthew 1:22–23 explicitly links the Isaiah prophecy to the birth of Jesus. Accordingly, many Christians understand the Isaiah prophecy as referring to Mary and the birth of Jesus..

There are two important words in Hebrew that can be translated into English as "virgin": הלוחב, *bethulah*, and המלע, *`almah*. Isaiah uses *`almah* in the Masoretic Text, and so conservative Christians have tried to demonstrate that the word unambiguously means "virgin", while other scholars, Christian, Jewish and otherwise, have tried to demonstrate that the word means simply "young woman", without any necessary connotation of virginity. *`Almah* occurs seven times in the Hebrew Bible and usually seems to mean a young woman of marriageable age (e.g. Genesis 24:43), but is never used in the Old Testament of anyone who was not a virgin; *bethulah* is accepted in modern Hebrew usage as the characteristic Hebrew word for virgin. However, it is qualified by a statement 'neither had any man known her' in Gen. 24:16, and is used of a widow in Joel 1:8. In the Ugaritic tablets, *bilt* was used of the goddess Anath who was a consort of Baal; and in other records, the Aramaic counterpart of *betulah* is used of a married woman.

There is no Hebrew tradition of virgin birth: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Hannah were infertile women who miraculously gave birth late in life. However, this is also consistent with the view that the Messiah would be unique. Christian apologists nevertheless argue that many first century Jews, including Jewish converts to Christianity, used the Septuagint Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, which used the word παρθενος, *parthenos*, which they say clearly means "virgin". However, the *Greek-English Lexicon* edited by Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott lists other meanings for the word:

παρθενος, *parthenos*, I. 1. maiden, girl; virgin, opp. γυνή *gynê*, "woman". 2. of unmarried women who are not virgins, Iliad 2.514, etc. 3. Parthenos, hê, the Virgin Goddess, as a title of Athena at Athens. 4. the constellation Virgo. II. as adj., maiden, chaste. III. as masc., parthenos, ho, unmarried man, Apocalypse 14.4.

Even so, "virgin" is the primary meaning, which is where we derive words such as parthenogenesis, meaning when a female produces offspring without being fertilized by a male.

There is also archaeological evidence that Jewish speakers of Greek used the word "parthenos" elastically; Jewish catacombs in Rome identify married men and women as "virgins," and some have suggested that in this case the word was used to call attention to the fact that the deceased was someone's first spouse. Nevertheless, it remains true that Jews stopped using the more explicit Septuagint translation as Christianity spread, and that post-Christian Jewish translations into Greek use νεανίς, *neanís*, meaning "young woman", rather than *parthenos*. Some scholars claim that the Septuagint does not use *parthenos* very precisely, as it translates at least three different Hebrew words by it: *bethulah*, "maiden/virgin"; *`almah*, "maiden/virgin"; and הרענ, *na`arah*, "maiden, young woman, servant". The meaning of the word *parthenos* in the Septuagint is sometimes expanded in a way not seen in Isaiah. This would assume that the 9th century AD Hebrew manuscripts we have today are identical to the manuscripts from which the Septuagint was translated 1,000 years earlier, which may or may not be the case.

Genesis 24:16 And the damsel [*parthenos* = Hebrew *na`arah*] was very fair to look upon, a virgin [*parthenos* = Hebrew *bethulah*], neither had any man known her: and she went down to the well, and filled her pitcher, and came up.

Judges 21:12 And they found among the inhabitants of Jabeshgilead four hundred young virgins [*parthenous* = Hebrew *bethulah*], that had known no man by lying with any male: and they brought them unto the camp to Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan.