

#### **4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent**

**Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Matthew 1:18-25; Romans 1:1-7**

**Isaiah 7:10-16** is the well-known prophecy of Immanuel: “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman (the virgin) is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel” (7:14). This, of course, is the passage around which Matthew builds his story of the birth of Jesus, as presented in our gospel lesson for today. But to fully appreciate this prophecy, one must put the original passage into its historical context.

This prophecy is spoken to King Ahaz (735 -715 BCE) of Judah. The incident upon which the prophecy of Isaiah 7:10-16 was built happened at the beginning of Ahaz’ reign. The dominant nations in 735 BCE that occupied today’s Palestine, Israel, Lebanon and Syria were Syria, Israel and Judah. But the political and military power that posed the greatest threat to them was the mammoth Assyrian Empire that much coveted their land. King Pekah of Israel and King Rezin of Syria pressured the king of Judah, Jotham to join them in a military coalition to defeat Assyria, so that the three kingdoms could operate independent of Assyrian dominance. Jotham refused, preferring to set his own foreign policy free of the influence of his two larger and more powerful compatriots. Pekah and Rezin therefore declared war upon Judah, with the hope of pressing Jotham into conformity (II Kings 15:37). But, before their combined armies could engage Jotham’s troops, Jotham died.

Jotham’s son, Ahaz, was quickly placed upon Judah’s throne. The coalition invaded Judah, taking outlying cities and closing in upon Jerusalem (II Kings 16:5). Their intention was to take Jerusalem, execute Ahaz and place their puppet on the throne, an Aramean named ben Tabeel (Isa. 7:6). What was Ahaz to do?

Ahaz saw his nation invaded, his cities being taken, his capital threatened, his army unable to stop the headlong rush of the coalition and, consequently, his throne and the very existence of the state of Judah endangered. He had to act quickly. So he decided to appeal to Tiglath-Pilezer, the monarch of the Assyrian Empire, for aid (Isa. 7:1--8:18).

Isaiah, who was the court prophet and probably himself of royal birth, opposed such an action. The consequences of such a decision would be dire, not only to Judah but to Israel, as well. Coming to an ally’s aid would give Tiglath-Pilezer all the excuse he would need to invade Syria and Israel (whose very existence acted as a buffer between Assyria and Judah), destroy them and annex them directly to the empire (thus bringing the southern border of the empire to the northern border of Judah). Further, such an action would bring Judah directly under the hegemony of Assyria, would require the payment of immense tribute that would eventually bankrupt Judah, would turn them into a client-state and would guarantee their eventual absorption into the Assyrian empire.

Ahaz argued with Isaiah, stating that such a course of action was the only “practical politics” that would at least guarantee the continued existence of Judah for at least the next generation. It was “buying time” for them (Isa. 7:1-9). Isaiah pointed out that Yahweh, the “Lord of hosts (or of immense armies)” would fight for Ahaz and would rescue Judah from the attack of Pekah and Rezin – if only Ahaz would trust in God to so intervene! To demonstrate to Ahaz that God

would be true to Isaiah's word, the prophet begged Ahaz, "Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or as high as heaven" (7:11).

Encouraging the king to "ask a sign of the Lord your God" was no light matter. The word literally means "a beacon fire" that communicates a king's victory of an enemy. A sign was a direct signal or communication from God, a token or a memorial (Gen. 9:12; I Sam. 2:34) or a miraculous wonder (Exod. 7:9) (that's why the terms "signs and wonders" were often coupled in a single phrase, in order to capture both nuances of the word, "sign"). The sign can be named by Ahaz, Isaiah states. And it can be as radical and imaginative of a sign as Ahaz can imagine even outside human experience – "as deep as Sheol or as high as heaven". But the purpose of this sign is that it will make clear to Ahaz that he need not depend upon Tiglath-Pilezer for his rescue. Instead, he can depend solely upon Yahweh.

Ahaz responds with pious words. "I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test" (vs. 12), he declares. Of course, Isaiah immediately sees through the king's ruse. Ahaz has already made up his mind. He is going to trust in the power of human armies, not in the power of God (as Stalin once put it when confronted with the opposition of the pope, "how many army divisions can the pope put in the field?" – the answer being "none"). But he cloaks his intentions in pietistic talk of not putting God to the test.

Isaiah then, in essence, responds, "All right, you will not put God to the test by asking for a sign. But God will give you a sign anyway. And here is the sign." Isaiah then speaks the sign from God for which Ahaz refuses to ask: "Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted" (vss. 14-16).

To paraphrase this sign, what Isaiah is declaring is the following: "You are so frightened of the invasion of your nation by Pekah and Rezin, kings of Israel and Syria, that you are willing to place Judah under the permanent dominance of Assyria. Well, God has a sign for you. The young woman particularly known to you will bear a son, who will be named Immanuel (or "God with us"). Before this baby is old enough to be weaned from his mother's breast (that is, old enough to discern good from evil and thus be disciplined), these two kings will be defeated and will withdraw from your land. So, just trust in God to deliver you, and you will find both your nation preserved and its wealth assured." Thus, Isaiah is telling Ahaz that the invasion will be resolved in the next twelve to fifteen months if the king only has the faith to trust God for the solution, and not to turn to Assyria for that solution.

The text of Isaiah's "sign", however, is replete with difficulties. First, who is this young mother? Isaiah doesn't name her. Instead, the word Isaiah uses to describe her is the Hebrew word *almah*, or "young woman". It is not the Hebrew word for "virgin", which is *bethulah*. Nor is it the Hebrew word for an adult married woman, which is *ishshah*. So what is an *almah*? An *almah* was a young woman of marriageable age, a person between twelve and nineteen years old. It was between twelve and nineteen that a Hebrew girl would get married. If the *almah* being referred to in this passage was a young woman who was recently married, then the marriage would likely have been consummated and she was no longer a virgin. If she were not yet

married, the assumption would be that she was still a virgin. So *almah* could be equally used of a teenager who had not yet had sexual intercourse or one who had participated in intercourse. But she would be a teenager and not a mature woman.

Where, then, does the interpretation of this passage arise that this “young woman” is a “virgin”? When the Hebrew Bible was first translated from its original Hebrew into Greek about 150 BCE (Greek was the common language of its day) in the work that became known as the Septuagint (or LXX, for short), the translators selected the Greek word *parthenos* for the Hebrew *almah*. Like *bethulah* in the Hebrew, *parthenos* in Greek unequivocally means a woman who has never had sexual intercourse. It can be argued that the translators selected the Greek word *parthenos* because, by 150 BCE, the Hebrew understanding of this passage was that it was a Messianic prophecy in which *almah* was being used of a virgin young woman; therefore, the translators chose to be explicit rather than hinting by using the word *parthenos*. It could thus be argued that it was this perspective Matthew embraced when he intentionally used the LXX translation in his quotation of Isaiah 7:14 in Matthew 1:23 (see the Gospel Lesson commentary below).

But the question still remains. Who was this particular *almah* to which Isaiah referred? The “sign” makes no sense unless this particular *almah* is known both to Ahaz and to Isaiah. There are three possible candidates for the young woman to whom Isaiah is here referring.

The first possibility is the wife of Ahaz, Queen Abijah (II Kings 18:2; II Chron. 29:1). Ahaz was a young man, and Abijah would have still been a teen-ager at the time that Isaiah would have announced this “sign”. The argument is strengthened by the fact that the Canaanite parallel to the Hebrew *almah* is “queen”, so that Isaiah could intentionally be doing a play on words in this reference (since the Canaanite language would be well known to both Ahaz and Isaiah because the kingdom of Judah occupied formerly Canaanite territory and the Canaanites in Judah would make up its largest non-Jewish minority). In this scenario, what Isaiah would have been saying to Ahaz was “Your wife is pregnant (whether you know it or not). Before the baby to be born to her has been weaned from her breasts, these two kings who have invaded Judah will be driven by God from your land”. The baby born to Queen Abijah was Hezekiah, who eventually became Judah’s greatest king next to David and Solomon. But Hezekiah was already born but was not yet weaned. If the *almah* to whom Isaiah was referring was, indeed, Abijah, then that would mean that this “sign” would have been “speeded up”, suggesting that it was not to be 12 to 15 more months before Pekah and Rezin would be driven by God from Judah, but that it was going to happen in just the next few months.

The second alternative is that the *almah* was Isaiah’s wife, referred to in Isaiah 8:3. Since Isaiah was of noble birth, both he and his wife would be known to Ahaz. This is the alternative preferred by the majority of biblical scholars, simply because it has the least problems with it. Isaiah named his children as acted-out prophecies (Isa. 8:1; 7:3). The baby who would have been born to Isaiah’s young wife (who was pregnant at this time) would have been Maher-shal-hash-baz (8:1). This interpretation is the most convenient for this passage. However, the difficulty with this interpretation is the radical difference in the meanings of their particular names. “Immanuel” means “God-with-us” in Hebrew. “Maher-shal-hash-baz” means “Swift the spoil, prompt the plundering”. Such a negative name hardly means “God With Us”!

The third alternative is that it is a reference to both an *almah* and a child unknown to us. This is the alternative preferred by the Hebrew scribes and priests 600 years after Isaiah wrote it, when the LXX was translated from Hebrew to Greek. In this alternative, the nuance of *almah* as a young still unmarried woman (and thus a virgin) is intended here, as Israel looked toward a conquering savior who would set them free from tyranny. This, of course, became the traditional interpretation of this passage. The problem with this alternative, however, is that it does not offer an immediate solution to Ahaz' dilemma. The "sign", coming to pass 600 or 730 years after Pekah's and Rezin's invasion of Judah hardly serves as an alternative to Assyria's intervention. So, in the final analysis, we simply can't determine the *almah* to whom Isaiah's sign refers.

The other character in this prophecy is the child, Immanuel. Who is this Immanuel? Who is "God-With-Us"? He is clearly a baby who will grow up to become the political, military and spiritual savior of Israel, the "branch" referred to in Isaiah 11:1-9, and the "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" prophesied in Isaiah 9:6-7. He is one who, according to today's Old Testament lesson, "eats curds and honey", which were delicacies that had to be imported into Jerusalem and thus could be afforded only by nobility or the exceedingly rich (so the child must be of noble birth and of the lineage of David). But beyond that, we can't tell by internal reference in the book of Isaiah who this child is. Some might consider him to be Hezekiah, the son of Ahaz and his immediate successor. Hezekiah was as committed to following Yahweh and Yahweh's agenda for God's people as Ahaz was committed to practical politics and the worship of Ba'al. His reign was one of the more successful reigns in Judah's long history. But Hezekiah didn't live up to Isaiah's expectations for Immanuel, and revealed himself to be a very flawed and sometimes prideful man (e.g., Isa. 39, II Kings 20:12-15).

So, who is this "Immanuel"? We don't know if Isaiah meant it to be a reference to any specific person alive during Isaiah's lifetime (e.g., Hezekiah or Maher-shalal-hash-baz). But we do know that the church has traditionally understood Immanuel to be Jesus of Nazareth. This "Immanuel" was born 730 years after Isaiah's speaking of this prophecy and far too late to secure Ahaz' throne. But he was the definitive fulfillment of Isaiah's "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" who would "replant" God's intentions for the world as a "root out of dry ground", and thus secure God's throne forever!

The obvious question this entire scripture begs is the question, "How did it actually all turn out? What actually happened? Did Ahaz take Isaiah at his word and trust God? Or did he depend on an alliance with Assyria to save him from the invading forces of Pekah and Rezin?"

The answer is that Ahaz did not take God's sign seriously. Instead, he depended upon practical politics. He appealed to Tiglath-Pilezer for aid. And just as Isaiah had predicted, Tiglath-Pilezer used the situation as an excuse to come to the aid of Judah by invading both Syria and Israel in 734 BCE. Syria fell before him and was annexed to the Assyrian Empire. And Israel would have fallen except that King Pekah was murdered by Hoshea (II Kings 15:30) who promptly surrendered to Assyria and paid tribute. This preserved the northern kingdom of Israel for an additional twelve years until it finally fell to Assyria in 722-721. As a result of Assyria's rescue of Ahaz, Judah became a client state of the empire for the remainder of Ahaz' reign. Thus,

Ahaz' commitment to play practical politics resulted in the eroding of Judah's independence and provided the opportunity for Assyria to become even more dominant as the reigning power in the Palestinian area.

Intriguingly, the son of Ahaz, Hezekiah, faced a very similar situation during his reign. The then-Assyrian emperor, Sennacherib, decided to finally take Judah and to complete the building of an empire that ran from Assyria in the northeast to the borders of Egypt. When Sennacherib succeeded his father, Sargon, as ruler of Assyria in 705, Hezekiah refused to pay tribute and rebelled against Assyria's authority. The Assyrian empire soon invaded Judah, conquering the country except for its capital city, Jerusalem and its environs. Faced with the demand to surrender, Hezekiah sought advice from Isaiah and received the same essential message: "Depend on Yahweh for your rescue; do not turn to other nations". Unlike his father Ahaz, Hezekiah trusted Yahweh for his deliverance, and God rescued Judah from almost certain annihilation through a great plague that devastated the Assyrian army and sent its remnant scurrying home to the safety of Ninevah (Isaiah chs. 36-37; II Kings 18:13—19:36). Thus Hezekiah succeeded where Ahaz had failed, all because he took seriously and acted upon the testimony of "Immanuel" – that is, that God, indeed, was with Judah!

## **Psalm 80**

Psalm 80 is a prayer for Israel's restoration. It is a balanced and beautiful psalm, full of powerful images. But it is also a psalm that reveals that its author doesn't recognize the gravity of the sin of Israel.

The psalm is built around a refrain, repeated three times (80:3, 7 and 19): "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we might be saved". The first time the refrain is used is to conclude the first image (80:1-3) of a shepherd caring for his flock, Israel, but disturbed by their rebelliousness. The second time the refrain is used is to conclude the second image (80:4-7). That image is of a father, angry at his children's disobedience. But the third time it is used is in conjunction with the dominant image of the Psalm – Israel as a vine (80:8-19).

By likening Israel to a vine, the Psalmist joins with Israel's greatest prophets in using a common image – Isaiah in 5:1-7, Jeremiah in 2:21 and Ezekiel for the entirety of his chapter 15. Here is what the Psalmist has to say about Israel as the vine:

"You (God) brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches; it sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the River. Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that moves in the field feed on it. Turn again, O God of hosts; look down from heaven and see; have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand has planted. They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down; may they perish at the rebuke of your countenance. But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself. Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name" (80:8-18).

The image is a powerful image – one of God bringing a little shoot of a vine out of Egypt, planting it in the rich soil of Palestine, and then watching it grow as it spreads to north and south, east and west until that one plant has filled the entire nation of Israel, to its very boundaries. But then God begins acting against it! Apparently for no reason, God breaks down the walls surrounding the vine so that the boar and every wild beast might enter the vineyard and forage on the plant (Assyria, Egypt, Babylon). Now, they have virtually destroyed the vine, and the psalmist is calling to God both for redress and correction of the situation, so that Israel could have “a future and a hope”.

What is missing from this account is any recognition on the part of the psalmist that Israel’s destruction was caused in any way by their disobedience of the covenant, their rejection of God or their acts of injustice. There is no *mea culpa* in this psalm. If this psalm was the only scriptural record with which we might work, we would have to conclude that Yahweh was simply acting arbitrarily to punish Israel, with no justification for his action. Therefore the psalm’s prayer, “Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we might be saved” falls on God’s deaf ears, for there is no recognition of guilt on Israel’s part and, consequently, no repentance!

**Matthew 1:18-23** begins Matthew’s story of the birth of “Jesus the Messiah” (1:18). This account is preceded by the opening words of the Gospel of Matthew, which is the genealogy that demonstrates that Jesus is both in the lineage of David but is also within a lineage of marginalized people. The genealogy of Jesus as presented by Matthew reads like a “Who’s Who” of Israelite history, with shapers of the nation like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, Boaz, Jesse, David, Solomon, Hezekiah and Josiah all being direct descendants of Jesus ben Joseph. It includes 15 kings of Israel. It is a notable line.

But it also includes – intentionally so – some very marginalized people. It mentions very few women. But it is intriguing in its selection of the woman that it does mention besides Mary – Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. Who were these women? They were, first of all, women – and by that reality were automatically disenfranchised. Second, they were all Gentile women: Tamar was an Adullamite (Gen. 38), Rahab was an occupant of pre-Israelite Canaan (Joshua 2), Ruth was a Moabite woman, and Bathsheba was likely a Hittite (II Sam. 11 – and if not a Hittite herself, one who was married to a Hittite). Third, they were all engaged in activities not thoroughly acceptable: Tamar was Judah’s daughter-in-law who used her sexual charm to seduce Judah, Rahab was a prostitute, Ruth was a pauper and gleaned Boaz’ field. And Bathsheba committed adultery with King David. Fourth, all of their actions called powerful men to responsible and just behavior – Tamar made Judah obey his levirate responsibilities, Rahab enabled Jewish spies to escape and thus led to the fall of Jericho, Ruth got Boaz to assume his levirate responsibilities, and Bathsheba got David to make Solomon king. Intriguingly, this meant that the kings of Judah traced their lineage to four Gentile women – Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. And all this Matthew thought was important enough to record in his genealogy of Jesus – thus implying, “This is the blood that ran in the Messiah’s veins!”

The story of the birth of Jesus begins in Matthew with the words, “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” (1:18-21). Then Matthew comments, “All this took place to fulfill 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!’” (vss. 22-23).

Mary begins her contribution to the family line as questionably as did Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. She is pregnant out of wedlock! This was totally unacceptable in the Israel of the first century A.D. Mary would have been ostracized from her community and Joseph banned from the synagogue as the apparent father of the child. Of course, Joseph knew he was not the father, so his appropriate response would either be to publicly deny his paternity and condemn her to the Mosaic Law’s decree of stoning for the act of adultery (Deut. 22:23-27). Or “unwilling to expose her to public disgrace”, he could “dismiss her quietly” – that is, quietly break the engagement and have her leave Bethlehem to give birth to the baby elsewhere and then surrender it to others. It was this latter course he had decided upon, because he was, according to Matthew, “a righteous” or just “man”.

But “an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream” and told him that “the child conceived in Mary is from the Holy Spirit”. This son was to be named Jesus, the angel instructed, “for he will save his people from their sins”. Joseph, hearing this, obeyed the angel because he was, as Matthew had pointed out earlier, a “righteous” or just “man”. He married Mary, took her to Bethlehem to birth the baby, and hoped nobody was counting the months!

It is intriguing that Matthew, seeking to demonstrate the marginalization of the Messiah even in his birth, in turn unconsciously marginalizes Mary. Whereas in the Gospel of Luke, Mary is a strong and even forceful presence, in Matthew she is a non-person. We never hear her voice; we never consider her emotions including her fear of being condemned as an adulteress and facing possible execution, we never observe any actions on her part. She is completely passive in this story. All of the speaking, the emotions of being cuckolded and betrayed, the actions are all on Joseph’s part. It is he – who is not even the father of the child – who captures all the attention of Matthew. Thus, seeking to demonstrate marginalization of the gospel, Matthew unconsciously marginalizes Mary!

It is also intriguing that there is not nearly the emphasis on the actual birth of Jesus in Matthew as there is in the birth narrative of the Gospel of Luke. The emphasis in Matthew is on the response of Joseph to the news that his betrothed is pregnant and the actions he takes to legitimize Jesus’ birth. Matthew’s second chapter, which deals with the visit of the wise men, doesn’t even mention Jesus’ birth. It only informs us that the wise men came to see King Herod “after Jesus was born”. Why this lack of information on the actual birth of Jesus?

The reason why is that in the Gospel of Matthew, the birth is not the issue. The emphasis of Matthew is on the genesis or origin of Jesus, not his birth. Of course, he was born; how else could he have gotten here? But what is important to Matthew is that this man is the Messiah, and

therefore is in the royal lineage of Israel. The opening sentence of the book says it all: “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (1:1). Jesus is the personed fulfillment of the covenant made between God and Israel, both its apex and its logical end. He is the high point of that work of salvation that began with Abraham, continued through David and ending in Jesus (the direct line ends with Jesus because he has no children). Matthew’s entire concern is to demonstrate that Jesus is the Messiah, God’s chosen person, God With Us, in order to “save his people from their sins”. The tragedy about Jesus, Matthew presents throughout his gospel, is that the very people who were most theologically capable of perceiving and welcoming Jesus as their Messiah marginalized him instead, because he threatened their political and economic position and power. But that he was the Messiah was clear.

This is captured in the first quotation Matthew presents from the Old Testament, a prophecy of the birth of the Messiah. He introduces that quotation by introducing it with “fulfillment” language. “All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet” (1:22b), Matthew wrote. These introductory words would be used by Matthew over and over again as he presented prophecy after prophecy that demonstrated that Jesus was the Messiah (e.g., 1:22-23; 2:5-6, 15, 17-18, 23; 3:3; 4:14-16; 8:17; 12:17-21; 13:35; 21:4-5; 26:31, 54, 56; 27:9-10). After so introducing this scripture, Matthew then quotes the Septuagint (LXX) Greek translation of Isaiah 7:14, “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call him Emmanuel, which means “God is with us” (see this Sunday’s Old Testament lesson for a full examination of this prophecy and the problems associated with it).

It is the Holy Scriptures that Matthew uses to legitimize the virginity of Mary, stating that this child was conceived in her, not by a man, but “from the Holy Spirit”. Matthew claims that it is with such a miraculous conception that we can know that it is God who “is with us” in the person and through the work of Jesus of Nazareth.

And what will be that work? “He will save his people from their sins” (vs. 21b). That means saving the nation from its corporate sins as well as personal, its political and economic sins of oppression and exploitation as well as spiritual sins. Matthew will show us a clear example of such corporate and public sin in just a few more verses, when he tells the reader of Herod’s decision to slay all the male babies below two years old in Bethlehem in order to eliminate the potential rival of a Messiah. It is from such that Jesus has come to deliver and liberate us. That is the significance of God’s action to bring into human life the marginalized Messiah of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is the significance of this introductory story of Jesus’ origins for the Gospel of Matthew.

**Romans 1:1-7** are the opening words of Paul’s letter to the Christian church in Rome – a church that Paul did not found, but with which he had great influence. Letters written at the time of Paul opened with a common formula: the sender’s name, the recipient’s name, and a very brief greeting (thus, “John, to Mary: greetings!”). In the opening of his letter to the Roman church, Paul expands this formula into a brief theological statement that anticipates the profound theological discourse that makes up the body of the book of Romans.

“Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, to all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1-7).

The opening of any first-century letter began with the sender’s name and credentials. In this case, Paul introduces himself (“Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God”) and then launches into an introduction – not of himself, but of Jesus – an introduction that runs for four verses. The second part of the opening formula, the recipient’s name, doesn’t occur until verse 7 with the simple statement “To all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints”. Then the third portion of the formula, the greeting, is handled with the short statement, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (also in verse 7). Thus, Paul places the weight of his introduction on both his credentials and on the work of Jesus Christ that authenticates Paul’s credentials. Let’s look at what Paul has to say about himself and about Jesus.

First, Paul calls himself “a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God”. Paul sees himself as a servant – that is, a person who is not free to do as he pleases but rather exists to be totally at the disposal of the master. The actual word Paul uses here is “*doulos*”, that is “bond-slave”. A *doulos* was not an employed servant who had a life independent of that of the master but was employed and reimbursed accordingly for his work of servitude (the Greek word for such a person was *pais*), nor was he a person who became a slave as a spoil of war or because of economic circumstances. Rather, a *doulos* was someone who was born into slavery and who would die in slavery; he was a person permanently bound to a given master unless sold by that master to another. In other words, he had no life independent of being a slave; that was the totality of his existence. By calling himself a “bond-slave”, Paul is stating that his relationship with Jesus Christ can best be likened to the relationship that a *doulos* has to his master – one who is totally absorbed in the service of his master as the substance and perimeter of his life.

Paul then continues to define himself; his next statement is that he is one who is “called to be an apostle”. The word “apostle” was a common word in first century Rome. An “apostle” was an official messenger sent by a king or nobleman to both share and to carry out the command of that king or nobleman. As an “apostle” of Jesus Christ, Paul saw himself as being an official messenger of the gospel (e.g., II Cor. 1:1). Therefore, Paul perceives himself (and wishes the Roman Church to perceive him) as one who is totally belonging to Christ (a “servant”) and as one who has been sent by God (an “apostle”).

Finally, Paul declares that he has been “set apart for the gospel of God”. That is, he has been dedicated by his master for a particular mission – in this case, to carry out “the gospel of God”. Thus, besides being “owned” by God (a servant) and being commissioned and sent (an apostle),

Paul is also invested to carry out a commission by God (set apart). This is who Paul perceives himself to be and the mission upon which he has been sent.

But the important question is not who is this Paul and what he is called to do. After all, he is only a slave doing his job. The important question is, “Who is the One who owns Paul and has set him apart for a prescribed mission, sending him on this mission?” Who is the One whose obedient servant Paul is? Here, in a few terse statements, Paul presents a theological summary of the person and work of Jesus Christ as the ultimate One who has been sent by God to the world.

According to Romans 1:3-6, Jesus Christ is “God’s Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord” (vss. 3b-4). The gospel, Paul declares (that is, the “good news”) is not an object or a religious rite, a temple or a set of beliefs. The gospel is a person – “God’s Son, Jesus Christ”. He is manifested to us in two ways, Paul declares. He “was descended from David according to the flesh”, so that he is clearly a human being, a legitimate descendant of King David and therefore of royal lineage. But he is also “Son of God with power by resurrection from the dead”.

As a son of David and as a fellow human being, Jesus shares our weaknesses. But he has also been “resurrected with power by the spirit of holiness”, the direct intervention of God. Jesus is both human and divine, Paul declares so that he both understands our limitations and yet can set us free to become all that God created us to be. This is the redemptive work in which Jesus is engaged, both for each one of us as individuals and in the church which is the manifestation of God’s work throughout humanity. And it is because of this redemptive work that we can declare that Jesus is indeed “God’s Son, Jesus Christ our Lord”.

How do we know that this assertion is true, Paul asks? We know that the redemptive work in which Jesus is involved as “God’s Son our Lord” is true because of two realities. The first is that of personal experience. “Once I was blind, but now I see” (John 9:25) Paul is a *doulos* of Jesus Christ because of what Christ has done for him. But secondly, it is because of the testimony of scripture. The gospel of the Christian faith is not something invented by Paul or by other Christians, the apostle declares. Rather, it was “promised beforehand through the prophets in the holy scriptures” (1:2a). It is not only that each of us as Christians, and all of us as the church proclaim “Once I was blind, but now I see”. It is that back throughout the entirety of the Hebrew Bible, the prophets have also declared “Once I was blind, but now I see”!

Therefore, Paul testifies to the Roman Church that he perceives his apostolic commission to be “to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of Jesus’ name”, and that “includes yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ” (vs. 6). Paul’s life was transformed by Christ’s intervention in it to turn him from the blindness of his church-persecuting ways to literally and spiritually receiving new sight in Christ. And that transformation led inevitably to a life lived as the “*doulos*” of Christ, in submission to God. Paul here states that he was saved to serve. And that should be the lot of everyone who is a part of the church in Rome, as well.

Therefore, Paul calls the Roman Christians, “you who are called to be saints” – that is, people who have been set apart by God for the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is to such people that Paul wishes them “grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”. This is not just a greeting, or the use of some pretty-sounding words. “Grace” encapsulates the entirety of the Christian experience – the recognition that God loves and embraces us, not because we are such marvelous people (because we are not), but because it is God’s nature to love us unconditionally. Wishing the Roman Christians “peace” was to wish them “shalom” – society as God intended it to be, with all in that society “doing justice, loving each other tenderly, and walking humbly with your God”. Thus, this greeting at the very beginning of the letter by Paul to the Roman church summarizes Paul’s yearning for that church – that it may be a church in which its people live in “grace” and “peace” with each other, doing justice, loving each other tenderly, walking humbly with God – and living like this because God has already embraced them through Jesus Christ, who loves them enough to die for them, is the ultimately embraceable One.

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