

The Birth of the Messiah

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No matter what our age, waiting is hard. Whether we are waiting for something joyful, something dreaded, or something unknown we find ourselves longing for the expected event to occur so that we will be relieved of the anxiety of waiting. During the Advent season the Church celebrates waiting—hard as it may be—so that during the Christmas season the Church celebrates fulfillment, joyful beyond all expectation.

We celebrate this rhythm of waiting and fulfillment every single year because, through the celebration we renew our gratitude for Jesus, our savior's first coming, we become more keenly aware of Jesus' present comings, and we renew our longing for his final coming.

The Expectation of a Messiah

As Advent begins, our readings from both the Old and New Testaments are about the expectation of a coming messiah. In the Old Testament, depending on whether we are celebrating Cycle A, B, or C of the Lectionary, we read passages from Isaiah, Jeremiah, Baruch, Zephaniah, or Micah, all prophets who spoke in the context of God's covenant relationship with God's people. In fact, the expectation of a messiah grew out of the people's understanding of their covenant relationship with God.

A covenant is an unbreakable, mutual agreement in which each partner binds him or her self in love and fidelity to the other.

Saying we have a relationship of covenant love with God is quite a claim. God created the whole universe, and God transcends it. How could we possibly think of God as entering into a relationship of mutual love and fidelity with us, a relationship in which partners are each bound by certain obligations? We do so because God initiated this relationship thousands of years ago with the call of Abraham around 1850 B.C.

One of the promises God made to Abraham and his descendants, including us, is that God will protect God's people. The expectation of a messiah was born from this promise. The word *messiah*, like the word *Christ*, means "anointed one." In Old Testament times priests, kings, and prophets were all anointed. When the people experienced suffering or were defeated by a political enemy, they expected God to send someone to save them.

Through the centuries God fulfilled this expectation time after time. When the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites in Egypt, God sent Moses to save them. When the Philistines threatened the Israelites, God sent David. When the Babylonians conquered them God sent Cyrus to the people. When the Israelites were subject to Roman rule, the people expected God to send someone to save them from the Romans.

During all of these times in their history the people waited for God to send someone to intervene, and their expectations were fulfilled. However, in Jesus their expectations were fulfilled beyond their wildest dreams.

Mutual Responsibilities

God had promised to protect the people, so when they suffered they asked themselves, “Why?” Had the people done something to cause their suffering? In response to this question, the prophets reminded the people that suffering was often the inevitable result of their sins—such as not honoring the Ten Commandments and not honoring the covenant. The prophets spoke of covenant love as mutual responsibility.

If the people were failing to obey the Ten Commandments and failing to take care of the poor in their midst they would surely suffer. In order to prepare for the messiah, the anointed one who would conquer their enemies and put an end to their suffering, the people had to repent.

Turning away from sin was an essential step in preparing for the coming of the messiah, and still is today. During Advent we are called to turn away from sin in order to prepare a way for the coming of the messiah.

A Message of Hope

While the prophets named the people’s sins and called them to repentance, the prophets’ message was still full of hope. Hope, like the expectation of the coming of a messiah, is essential to covenant love. The prophets always held out hope, not because the people deserved to be loved, forgiven, and redeemed, but because God loved them and wouldn’t stop loving them. It was against God’s nature to stop loving God’s people. It was simply impossible.

That is why our covenant relationship with God is unbreakable, not because we are always faithful but because God is always faithful. When we fail, God’s response is to call us back to fidelity, not to end our relationship.

The prophets’ messages of hope dominate our Old Testament Advent readings. As we celebrate Advent, recalling our salvation history, our hearts, too, are full of hope.

Jesus’ Coming Means Good News

Every year at the beginning of Advent, we hear about the second coming in the Sunday readings. This choice of topics reminds us that as we celebrate Jesus’ first coming, and as we prepare to give Jesus an even greater welcome into our own daily lives, we are still awaiting Jesus’ second coming. We profess this belief at every Sunday gathering when we recite the Creed: Jesus “will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.”

The early Christians believed Jesus would return in their lifetimes. At first they did not write down the Good News they had seen and heard. As the eyewitnesses of Jesus' life began to die, and time passed, they early Christians began to believe in an imminent—not immediate—second coming. These followers began asking, “When will the second coming occur?”

Since no one knew the answer to that question, including Jesus (see Mark 13:32), the lesson became, “Be ready always.” During Advent, as we prepare for the coming of the Lord, we remember that our turning away from sin in order to prepare the way does not take just take place during this season. We must live our lives in such a way that we are always prepared for the coming of the Lord.

The “end times” referred to in many Advent scripture readings are also called the *eschaton*, the second coming of Christ, or the reign of God. Under any time, the kingdom of God is one in which justice, love, and peace are prevalent, God's will is perfectly realized, and evil is vanquished forever.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* instructs that “Christ the Lord already reigns through the Church, but all the things of this world are not yet subjected to him. The triumph of Christ's kingdom will not come about without one last assault by the powers of evil” (CCC, 680) In the meantime, we disciples are challenged to promote the reign of God by living the way Jesus did—caring for the poor and vulnerable in our midst and sharing the Good News of Jesus with all whom we encounter.

Hopes More Than Fulfilled

When Jesus came, he was not at all what the people expected. Jesus was “...the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14). Jesus was divine, the second Person of the Blessed Trinity. The people had expected an instrument of God's power, like Moses or David, but they had not expected God to take on human flesh and dwell among them. Even a God whose love is unshakable and who always forgives was not expected to become one of us.

The understanding that Jesus is a divine person came after his Resurrection, though there were hints and suggestions in his authoritative teaching and his ministry among the people. During Jesus' life on earth his disciples realized that he was a great teacher and a great healer. They knew that God's power was in Jesus, but they did not realize until after the resurrection that Jesus is God incarnate.

Several times, Peter called Jesus “the Messiah” (Mark 8:30; Matthew 16:16; Luke 9:20), but a messiah to Peter was a person who saved God's people from political enemies and gave them extended life on earth, not a person who redeemed God's people from sin and offered them eternal life.

Only after the resurrection, when Jesus appeared to the disciples, opened the Scriptures for them, and commissioned them to carry on Jesus' work of building up the kingdom of God, were the disciples able to proclaim what we also proclaim about Jesus: Jesus is our Lord and our God (see John 20:28). In Jesus the people's hopes for a messiah, hopes born in covenant love, were fulfilled beyond anything that anyone could imagine. God took on human flesh and dwelt among us in order to reveal the unimaginable depth of God's love for each one of us.

Great Good News

The stories surrounding Jesus' birth are post-resurrection stories. They teach the early Church's understanding of Jesus' divinity.

In Matthew we read that the annunciation, that is, the announcement of the Good News of the Savior's coming is to Joseph, and in Luke it is to Mary. In both accounts the authors tell us that Mary will conceive her child through the Holy Spirit.

In each annunciation story the post-resurrection understanding of Jesus' identity and role are placed on the lips of an angel. In the Gospel according to Matthew the angel says that Mary "will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

In Gospel according to Luke the angel says, "And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High"(Luke 1:31-33). This is indeed great good news.

Promises Fulfilled

After the resurrection the early Church understood things about Jesus that were not previously understood—Jesus' identity as a divine Person and the fact that, through his incarnation, life, ministry, Passion, death and Resurrection, Jesus established an eternal kingdom and redeemed us from our sins. After the Resurrection, as the Church recorded stories surrounding the marvelous events that had occurred, storytellers wove details into the stories designed to teach the theological significance of the events.

One way in which the Gospel according to Matthew teaches the theological significance of Jesus' conception and birth is by emphasizing that Jesus fulfills the words of the prophets.

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," which means, "God is with us." (Matthew 1:22-23).

Matthew quotes Isaiah (see Isaiah 7:14) who said these words to King Ahaz around 732 B.C. Ahaz was tempted to trust political power and promises rather than God's power and promises,

so Isaiah was reminding Ahaz that God had promised to protect God's people. God had promised to be faithful to the house of David. Ahaz was of that house, Ahaz's son would be too, and God would also be with him. So, Ahaz should put his trust in God.

By quoting Isaiah, Matthew demonstrates that Isaiah's words had a meaning only fully understood in the light of the resurrection. The prophet's words were fulfilled in that they took on a fuller, previously not understood meaning: they foreshadowed Mary's conception of Jesus, and Jesus' incarnation—marvelous events that were never expected.

In addition to being the fulfillment of the words of the prophets, Jesus is the fulfillment of all of God's promises to God's people throughout the centuries. The Gospels according to Matthew and Luke both include genealogies in order to teach this truth.

The genealogies of Matthew 1:1-17 and Luke 3:23-37 are Joseph's side of the family, not Mary's. Yet, both Gospels acknowledge that Joseph is not Jesus' biological father: Matthew, as he concludes his genealogy, says, "...Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Of her was born Jesus who is called the Messiah" (1:16). Luke, as he begins his genealogy, says, "Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work. He was the son (as was thought) of Joseph..." (Luke 3:23). The writers did not include genealogies to trace biological relationships. They did so to teach theological truths: Matthew's genealogy goes back to Abraham to teach that, through Jesus, God has fulfilled all of God's promises to Abraham and Abraham's descendants. Luke's genealogy goes back to Adam to teach that through Jesus, God has redeemed the whole human race from sin.

Matthew and Luke's Stories of Jesus' Birth

Matthew and Luke's stories of Jesus' birth are so familiar to us that we may not have a clear and distinct idea of each in our minds. Most of us, when we arrange our crib sets as part of our family celebration of Christmas, or when we enact the Christmas scene with our children, combine the stories. We bring Matthew's wise men to worship at Luke's scene of Jesus in the manger.

One way to probe the theological depth of each story is to note those details that are unique to each story. Although the accounts have much in common, each has many details that appear only in that Gospel.

For instance, only Matthew pictures the wise men following a star until they find the child. Only Luke pictures Jesus lying in a manger because there was no room for the family at the Inn. By exploring the significance of these differences we will discover the great good news that each Gospel is teaching

Matthew uses Old Testament passages to cast light on events recorded in the New Testament events. This method of teaching, called *midrash*, was common among Jewish scribes for

hundreds of years. If we want to understand the unique aspects of Matthew's account the best place to look is the Old Testament.

In the Book of Numbers we read:

I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not near—
a star shall come out of Jacob,
and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel; ... (Numbers 24:17a).

In the book of Isaiah we read:

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn. . . .
all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord. (Isaiah 60:1-3, 6).

The setting for the passage from Numbers is the plains of Moab (about 1200 B.C.) during the time when the Israelites were conquering the Holy Land. The speaker assures the Israelites that God will send them a leader who will establish peace.

The passage from Isaiah takes place during the Babylonian exile (587 B.C. – 537 B.C.). The prophet assures the people that a day will come when God will lead them back to the Promised Land and other nations will honor them with gifts.

Matthew takes the star from Numbers and the kings bearing gifts from Isaiah and weaves them into his story of the birth of Jesus. By doing this Matthew is teaching that the hope for a king that would establish peace and the hope that all nations would recognize God's light shining on Israel have both been fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus has conquered evil, and all nations will come to recognize and adore him.

Only Luke pictures Jesus lying in a manger because there was no room for Mary and Joseph at the inn. In Jeremiah we read:

O hope of Israel,
its savior in time of trouble,

why should you be like a stranger in the land,
like a traveler turning aside for the night (Jeremiah 14:8)

Jeremiah begs God to make his presence known and to bring an end to the drought from which the people are suffering.

Luke alludes to this passage when he pictures Jesus being born in a manger rather than at an inn. Travelers stay in inns; they are here today and gone tomorrow. Jesus, on the other hand, has come to dwell among the people for all time.

One places food for the flock in a manger. Jesus is food for the flock. By placing Jesus in the manger, Luke presents the same truth that we read in the Gospel according to John when Jesus says, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35).

Preparing for the Coming of the Messiah

As we prepare for the coming of the Messiah we live in gratitude because we know that God so loved us that God became one of us and dwelt among us.

We live in hope because we know that the more we prepare the way for the coming of the Lord in our minds and hearts the more we will experience the power and presence of the risen Christ in our everyday lives

Finally, we live in joyful expectation because we know that Jesus will come again. Our prayer in Advent, and always, is, "Come, Lord Jesus, come."

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