

The Virgin Shall Conceive

Isaiah 7-9

WHAT WE FOUND

Behind the most famous verse in Isaiah stands a terrified king. Syria and northern Israel were marching to end David's dynasty, and Ahaz's heart "*shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.*" God's word: stand firm in faith or you will not stand at all (7:9). Then a blank check: ask any sign, "*deep as Sheol or high as heaven.*" Ahaz refused with a pious-sounding excuse, "*I will not put the LORD to the test,*" while his trust lay with Assyria, where 2 Kings 16 records his appeal and payment with the temple treasury (2 Kings 16). The most dangerous refusals of grace are the ones that sound humble.

So the sign went over his head, to the whole house of David: "*Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel.*" We faced the oldest objection to that verse at full strength, the argument that the Hebrew *almah* names a *young woman* of marriageable age and does not by itself require virginity, and that the oracle had a near horizon in Ahaz's own decade, and answered it the way the Church has since the second century: the *virgin* rendering was chosen by Jewish translators of the Septuagint two centuries before Christ; *almah* nowhere clearly names a married woman; a routine birth is no sign on the scale God offered; and the oracle itself outgrows every candidate in Ahaz's day, until the promised child owns the land (8:8) and carries the name *Mighty God* (9:6), the very title used of the LORD one chapter later (10:21). A real word to its own decade, exhausted only in Christ (Matthew 1:22-23; CCC 497).

We found the great light of 9:2 dawning first in Zebulun and Naphtali, the first lands Assyria devoured, and then found Matthew 4 planting Jesus' home address exactly there: the light rises first where the darkness fell first. And we ended with the fork every believer faces: Ahaz and Mary both received an unthinkable word about a child. Ahaz performed reverence to protect a decision already made. Mary asked her honest *how*, then said "*let it be to me according to your word.*" Every act of faith chooses between them.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Justin Martyr • *Dialogue with Trypho*

Around AD 155 the Jewish scholar Trypho argued that Isaiah's word need mean no more than *young woman* and pointed to a king of Isaiah's own day. Justin's reply still stands: a young woman bearing a child is no sign at all, for all young women bear children; the sign offered was deep as Sheol and high as heaven, and only a virgin conceiving rises to that scale.

St. Irenaeus • *Against Heresies, Book 3*

St. Irenaeus points to an inconvenient fact for those who retranslate the verse: *parthenos*, virgin, was the rendering chosen by Jewish translators of the Septuagint long before Jesus was born. The Church did not smuggle the virgin into Isaiah; she found her there, in Israel's own Greek Bible.

St. Leo the Great • *Sermons on the Nativity (Sermon 21)*

The child of Isaiah's promise unites what no creature could: true God, born of the Father before the ages, and true man, born of the Virgin in time. And because God has so honored our nature by taking it, St. Leo bids the Christian: acknowledge your dignity, and do not return by sin to what you were before.

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

- Pray with Luke 1:26-38 once this week, placing your hardest current decision in the scene, and practice Mary's sentence until you can mean it: *let it be to me according to your word*.
- Check your Bible's rendering and footnote at Isaiah 7:14. Be able to explain to a friend, in two sentences, why the Church reads *virgin* there.
- Do one act of presence, not problem-solving, for someone in darkness: show up, sit with, stay. Emmanuel is a name before it is a plan.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

Isaiah 9:6 (RSV2CE)

Before Next Session

Read Isaiah 11:1-10, and keep one image from Session 2 in your pocket: the holy seed and the stump.

Catechism References From This Session

CCC 496-497