

Sign of a Virgin • Isaiah 7:14

Back to the Future Part 2 was the latest blockbuster film starring Michael J. Fox. It was the sequel to the 1985 original Back to the Future which is the story about a teenager who travels back in time to 1955 in a borrowed time machine made out of a DeLorean car by an eccentric scientist. In Part 2 he gets in the same machine and moves forward to the year 2015 and makes some fascinating discoveries. For example, did you know that in 2015 there will be automatic shoe laces that tie themselves and that the criminal justice system in the United States will be absolutely effective and efficient because all lawyers will have been eliminated? Also, that's the year that the Chicago Cubs will win the world series. Isn't that great?

It would be a wonderful idea to travel into the future, to be able to see what life is going to be like next year or the year after, except if we're honest, we'll admit that that is an impossibility. It is something that is limited to movies and novels and to our imagination. But there is someone who can see the future and that is God. God is able to see the future as vividly and correctly as the present and the past. He not only sees it but he also controls it — so much so that he knows exactly what will take place six months or a year from now. He knows who will be happy and who will be sad, who will be single and who will be married, or poor or rich, or alive or dead, or Christian or heathen.

God knows absolutely everything about the future. And every once in awhile, rarely, but occasionally, through prophecy he parts the curtain, turns on the projector and gives us a glimpse of what the future actually will hold. That's what he did through a prophet named Isaiah in the year 740 B.C. God gave Isaiah a glimpse of what was to come in the days ahead. I invite you to mount up on the time machine of your imagination and travel with me back in history to the year 740 B.C. It is the year when King Uzziah died.

King Uzziah had been the ruler of the kingdom of Judah for 52 years. His rule was longer than the typical life expectancy in ancient times so most of the people had only known one king, one regime, for all of their lives. Uzziah's death was as destabilizing then as the collapse of Communism in eastern Europe today. There were many troubling questions. Who's going to rule? What's going to happen? Is there hope? Will chaos come? Will things get worse?

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Uzziah was succeeded by a king named Ahaz and Ahaz inherited a political mess. The nations that surrounded the tiny kingdom of Judah and it's capital city of Jerusalem were revving up for war. To the east was the emerging empire of Assyria, eventually to become a mighty power that would dominate much of ancient history and a large part of the ancient world. To the north were two smaller kingdoms, Ephraim, which was the split-off of the ancient kingdom of Israel that had itself become an independent monarchy, and Aram or Syria. Together Ephraim and Syria had decided that their only hope to fend off the assaults of the empire of Assyria was a political and military alliance. They joined together much like NATO in our modern times and they invited the kingdom of Judah and King Ahaz to come into this military alliance. He refused and the armies Ephraim and Syria decided to attack Jerusalem.

Imagine Ahaz — he's been a king only a short time, the invading armies are very near and are about to potentially wipe out the city, take its citizens captive, rape its women, pillage all of its goods. He took this terrific political mess and this frightening circumstance and turned it into worry. We all have a tendency to do that. In some ways it's as difficult to worry about what might happen as to face the realities of what does happen. You know the feeling — the anxiety of waiting for a pathology report, or thinking that you might be laid off or fired, or wondering if your family will be fractured by divorce. In those areas, the waiting can become almost maddening.

It was just then that the prophet Isaiah walked right up to King Ahaz, right up on the road to Washerman's Field at the end of the aqueduct, and spoke to him and told him, "The Lord's here, God is present and I speak to you a word directly from God." Let me tell you that in troubled times there's nothing quite like a word from God, nothing quite

like God saying that he's there and he cares and he makes a difference. He knows what the future will bring.

He may even be gracious enough to give a little glimpse of what that future will be. Isaiah tells the story himself in his diary found in Isaiah 7:1-9. He reports it like this:

When Ahaz son of Jothan, the son of Uzziah, was king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram and

Pekah son of Remaliah king of Israel marched up to fight against Jerusalem, but they could not overpower it.

Now the house of David was told, "Aram has allied itself with Ephraim"; so the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind.

Then the Lord said to Isaiah, "Go out, you and your son Shear-Jashub, to meet Ahaz at the end of the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Washerman's field. Say to him, 'Be careful, keep calm and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood — because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and of the son of Remaliah. Aram, Ephraim and Remaliah's son have plotted your ruin, saying, "Let us invade Judah; let us tear it apart and divide it among ourselves, and make the son of Tabeel king over it." Yet this is what the Sovereign Lord says:

"It will not take place, it will not happen, for the head of Aram is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is only Rezin.

Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be too shattered to be a people. The head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the

head of Samaria is only Remaliah's son. If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all."

The message is clear and powerful. God is present. He has everything under control. He sees the future and he says, "Don't worry, King. Don't be frightened; don't panic. I am the Sovereign God." But if you look at Ahaz' face you see that he's skeptical. He really doesn't believe it because he was swept along in the circumstances. You know from experience those times when the circumstances are so oppressive around us that even if God is shouting his word in our ears we don't hear it. Somehow we have a way of ignoring his promises and his comforts because of the harshness and the reality of the troublesome times in which we live.

And so God made him an offer. He said through Isaiah, "Ahaz, if you don't believe that I am God and you don't believe what I say is true, let me prove it to you with a sign. Pick any sign you want." When God makes an offer like that the potential is limited only by our imagination. What do you think Ahaz chose? Make the sun purple at four in the afternoon? Or the mountains shake, or dry up the sea, or turn all the lead that is in my house instantly to gold? Anything that he wanted, he could have. God said, "From the highest heights to the deepest depths,

name your sign and I'll do it." What would you pick if God gave you that kind of an offer to prove himself to you? Anything at all; any sign. Ahaz refused. His weak excuse was that he didn't want to test God although God was himself the initiator of the test. I suspect the greater truth is that he didn't want to listen to God no matter what God was about to do.

So God said, "If you don't want to pick a sign I will pick a sign, a simple sign for this troubled time." Isaiah records it in verses 14 to 16:

The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. He will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. But before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.

Now to understand that, I need to do some explaining and you need to help me out with an extra effort of understanding. When these words were first spoken and recorded, the Hebrew word *almah* was used. It may be translated either "young woman"

or "virgin," but it speaks more to gender and age than it does to sexual experience.

It is here stated that a young woman will conceive and will bear a child that will be a boy and before he's old enough to figure out the difference between right and wrong these two kingdoms and their kings will no longer be a threat; they will be wasted.

And so the sign was given, and the sign turned into a reality. Isaiah himself married a woman, his first wife had died, a woman whom the Bible describes as a prophetess, and she became pregnant and nine months later she bore a son whom she named the rather unlikely name of Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz. Now if you're pregnant and working on a list of names, you might want to put that name on your list: Maher-Shalah-Hash-Baz. It would be tough on a credit card or driver's license, but other than that it really has a nice ring to it!

Before the boy was old enough to know the difference between right and wrong, by his second birthday in 732 B.C., exactly what God predicted took place and the two nations of Ephraim and Syria were plundered. They were no longer a threat. And you think to yourself, "How does that fit in with today?" Well, imagine with me for a moment that in 1987 a prophet of God had spoken to the people in the streets of East Berlin and had said, "A woman is going to become pregnant and bear a son and

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before that baby is old enough to talk, the communist regime will be overthrown and democracy will prevail. The wall will be torn down and there will be talk of the reunification of East and West Germany.” In 1987 people would have thought that was insanity because it couldn’t happen that fast. But that’s exactly what happened in East Germany. It’s also exactly what happened in ancient Palestine. God’s predictions came true. The nations crumbled, the threat disappeared and God’s word was proven right.

All of which leads us to the profound question, “So what? Who cares? Three thousand years ago is ancient history. What difference does it make for me today with what I’m up against?” But it does make a difference. It makes an enormous difference because it tells us that history is not happenstance. It tells us that God is the God of history. It explains to us that the fall of communism and the rise of democracy is something that God not only knows, but that God is deeply involved in it. It says to us that the concerns about our own nation, about our economy, about what happened last week and what’s going to happen next week, about all the worries that swirl around in our mind, the opportunities that are before us and the fears that cause us dread — all of those things are known to God and that he is Sovereign.

God rules the world by his sovereignty. He is the God who gave a simple sign for troubled times. But there was more to it than that, much more. Much more than King Ahaz or Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz or even Isaiah ever dreamed in the eighth century B.C. For God had something far greater in mind in that prophecy.

If I were to point to you, you might guess that I am pointing to someone near you, or perhaps to everyone in your line. It would be difficult for you to know exactly what I had in mind. And so it was when God pointed into the future with the prophecy, the glimpse of what was to come. He pointed not to a single sign and a single son, but to two signs and to two sons. Not only to the *almah*, the wife of Isaiah who bore a son named Maher-Shalah-Hash-Baz, but also to a virgin named Mary who bore a son named Jesus. That sign was spectacular by comparison, a spectacular sign for all time.

In about the second century B.C., Greek was becoming the prevailing trade language of the Mediterranean world and so the Hebrew Old Testament scriptures were translated into Greek. When those ancient scholars and translators came to the proph-

ecy of Isaiah 7:14 they knew that there was something here far more than what took place in Isaiah’s day. So when they translated *almah* they translated it not as “young woman” but as “virgin.” They chose the Greek word *parthenos* familiar to us in that architectural masterpiece that sits atop the Acropolis in Athens, the Parthenon, which is dedicated to the virgin goddess Athena. At that time there was a growing expectation that the Messiah was soon to come and every young Hebrew girl wondered if she might be the mother.

When I was a college student I had a literature class in which the teacher taught that in the most pessimistic literature of history across generations and across culture there’s an interesting trend. Often at the end or near the end of the story is the birth of a child, saying that there was hope for the future.

I put that together with something that I once read in Time Magazine. There was an interview of Mother Theresa, the Nobel Laureate from Calcutta who has given her life to picking up those who are dying in the streets of that poverty-ridden city. Of the 56,000 people that have been brought into her shelter, over half died. The interviewer asked the question, “What do you think of the western lifestyle?” She answered, “I always say one thing. If a mother can kill her own child, then what is left of the west to be destroyed?”

I am so saddened by what is happening in America. I hate the polarization of our society over the abortion issue. I deeply sympathize with those women who face unwanted pregnancies, who recognize that the birth of a child may rewrite life —

those who struggle with poverty, with uncertainty, who are riddled with fears, who are trying to put life in order and some-

how think it impossible if the pregnancy is taken to term. Yet at the same time, I struggle with what I perceive by Biblical standards to be the frightening immorality of taking human life. I cannot help but wonder what hope there is for our society and our culture. If my professor’s perspective on history is right, then we live in a time when the story ends, not with hope, but with the death of hope.

What if the prophetess that married the prophet Isaiah had chosen an abortion rather than the birth of the sign for her troubled times? What if Mary, who was so surprised by her pregnancy, had decided that it was not the right time for an embarrassing pregnancy? She was surprised, you know. Oh, it’s true that young women of her age often prayed that they would be the mother of the Mes-

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siah. They had enormous hopes of what might someday be, but she was young, she was poor, she was sexually inexperienced. She was surprised and she was frightened by that which she faced. Her pregnancy created for her enormous difficulties but it also presented her with enormous divine possibilities because God had chosen to do something in her life and in her body which was absolutely spectacular, something unprecedented. Something which we in our scientific era, in our understanding of human physiology, struggle to understand.

We need to see that we are not talking about technicalities here. We are not saying that she was technically a virgin who had never had intercourse with a man but somehow may have been artificially inseminated. No, what we are talking about is that God did something miraculous — something that was totally out of the ordinary. In our mind set and our scientific understanding, we say that there is simply no way for a female ovum to produce a pregnancy unless fertilized by male sperm. Yet God somehow did it. To believe this takes faith. We must believe that God is God. We must believe that God can do anything he chooses. If we believe the truth of the Bible and that God is the creator of all of life, then he can make life however he chooses.

Virgin conception is an incredible thing but God chose the spectacular because of the significance of the child to be born. It's described in Matthew 1:18-23:

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" — which means, "God with us."

God had chosen a spectacular methodology because of the significance of what he did. For this was the bringing of God to earth, the son of God

who was heavenly became earthly. He who was deity became humanity and he did it all to meet the number one human need. That is to do battle and produce conquest over sin. It is true indeed, the circumstances of our lives range from war to disease, from international distress to our own personal problems all of which are symptoms of the permeating virus of sin that causes death. All we are able to do is to treat our society and ourselves symptomatically. It is only God who can cure the virus through Jesus Christ and so he spectacularly, surprisingly, significantly gave his son. His son was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, died a sacrificial death on the cross and rose a physical resurrection to life again. So that we could have the cure for sin. So that we could have a future and that future could be with God.

Let's go back to the future. For a moment imagine yourself in your own mental time machine, ten years from now, twenty years. What do you see? What are you like? Are you still alive? What are your relationships? Who are you? Then accelerate the time machine beyond the ten to twenty years from now, to fifty years, a hundred years, speed ahead to a thousand years into the future and what do you see? The future that we see then is dependent upon our present relationship with God's surprising, spectacular, significant gift — the sign for all times, Jesus Christ. If, today, we know him and accept him as our Savior from sin and acknowledge and commit to him as the boss, the master and Lord of life, then our future is guaranteed by God to be a future that we spend forever with Jesus Christ. Tomorrow's eternity depends on today's decision.

I invite you to bow your heads with me for just a moment of personal and silent prayer. Look into the future and see what there is to see and, in the present, commit to Jesus Christ. Tell God, "yes" to accepting his son as Savior and as Lord.

Father, I pray that today's decision in relationship to Jesus Christ will determine a glorious future, ten and twenty, fifty, a hundred, a thousand and forever years to come. In Jesus' name. Amen

Faith Matters is the Broadcast Ministry of
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
612-944-6300
www.wooddale.org
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