

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

By Bill Jackson

Isaiah 7:10-16

The disciple Matthew wanted his fellow Jews to realize that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah so they would accept Him as Savior. When Matthew wrote his Gospel, he backed up virtually every statement by showing how Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecy. Matthew even remembered a reference to virgin birth in the writings of Isaiah.

Isaiah wrote that young king Ahaz, who ruled Judah 700 years before Christ, was in trouble. The nations of Israel and Syria were attacking Judah to force Ahaz to join them in battling the Assyrians. The young king was not interested in fighting anyone. The Lord sent the prophet Isaiah to reassure Ahaz that God could protect Judah. Pointing to an *almah* ("virgin" or "young woman"), Isaiah told Ahaz that by the time she had a son and that son knew right from wrong, Israel and Syria would no longer be a threat. Symbolizing God's protection, the child would be named Immanuel, "God with us." The message given by God to Isaiah came true; within a few years Israel and Syria were out of the picture.

The focus of this Isaiah scripture is the timing of removing threats to Judah, not the virginity of the woman who would give birth before long; *almah* can mean either "young woman" or "virgin." The Greek language has no such ambiguity, so when Matthew quoted the passage, he used the word for "virgin," appropriate in describing the virgin birth of Christ. But what about the name? Jesus is not named Immanuel.

Jesus is called by many names in the Bible. Isaiah also called Him, "Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Jeremiah called Him "the Lord is our Righteousness." Names in the Bible have meaning, and Jesus fits all of those glorious names beautifully, but they were not His given name any more than "Immanuel."

Matthew was right to apply "Immanuel" to Jesus, for God truly became "with us" with the birth of Christ. Since Jesus came to be "with us," we have the assurance that God is with us all the time. Because of our faith and trust in Him, we ultimately can go be "with Him" in heavenly glory.

And what does the name *Jesus* mean? It is even better: "God saves." Praise be to God!

GREAT LIGHT

By Jim Van Hecke

Isaiah 9:2-7

“The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light...
For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given...
and his name will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (RSV)

In our current time of political and economic turmoil, when acrimony, mistrust, fear and hatred divide us and keep us from being “one nation under God” ... when our world seems so dark, let us remember that our present time is not dissimilar to the time of our text, when Isaiah forecast the birth of Jesus and proclaimed it as a “great light.”

It has been more than 2,700 years since Isaiah spoke and almost 2,000 since Jesus lived,

“but the world don’t seem much better today than when ‘E were crucified.”
- *The Sorrow of God* by G.A. Studdert Kennedy

But what was prophesied by Isaiah is still ours to claim today: that our hope for peace, justice and righteousness in our land and in our world can become a reality.

As we prepare during this season of Advent for the celebration of the birth of Jesus, it is our acting upon our belief that will bring us out of the darkness and into the “great light.” In the words of this hymn:

*“Come thou long expected Jesus
born to set thy people free;
from our fears and sins release us,
let us find our rest in Thee.”*

It is up to us. May it be so!

SONGS OF THE SEASON

By Jared Smith

Psalms 96

Music is a central component of how many of us experience the Christmas season. By the time the last bit of Halloween candy is unwrapped – and often a great deal earlier these days – sacred and secular holiday music permeates our public life, as artists from Bing Crosby to Mariah Carey conjure familiar feelings of anticipation and celebration as they sing and dream and wish.

Carols and hymns have the power to connect us, to tell stories that stick with us, to echo times gone by and herald days to come. They share words of love, hope, joy, and peace with tunes that allow those themes to make themselves at home within us, for at least a little while, as the sacred waiting of the advent season continues.

It is no wonder, then, that Psalm 96 compels us to sing, all of us, all the earth. This passage commands us to sing, that through our singing, we may tell of His salvation, declare His glory, worship Him in holy splendor – for He is coming. He is not yet here, but our song welcomes Him, creates space in our lives for Him, centers Him among the stories worth sharing. And our song joins us together: nations, peoples, heavens, earth, the sea and all that fills it, the field and everything in it. A holy catholic church, a communion of saints.

So, as the journey of advent approaches its destination at the manger, **sing**.

GOD CAN DO INCREDIBLE THINGS

By Patrick Miller

Sophomore, Broughton High School

Matthew 1:18-25

This is a super important passage that really shows what happened leading up to the birth of Jesus and how good God really is. Just to summarize, there was a virgin named Mary who was married to a man named Joseph. Joseph was planning to separate from her, but an angel appeared in his dream and told him that Mary will have a child named Jesus from the Holy Spirit. I looked at many different Bible translations, and they all convey the same message: Mary will give birth to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

We all have heard this story before because it is one of the most important parts of the Bible! Joseph was called in this passage by God's angel, and this shows that God can do incredible things. This can bring connections to our lives as well. Have you ever gotten a call or invitation from God that something will happen or to trust the process? God has a plan for us, and he is always with us.

Were there any parts that stuck out to you? For me, it was when the angel said that they shall name him Emmanuel which means "God is with us." Another part was in verse 21, where it was said that Jesus will save people from their sins. We all sin, and that is why Jesus died on the cross for us. All of us.

Now let me ask you, what do you think Joseph was thinking at this moment? Scared? Excited? How would you feel if you were in this situation?

Overall, these are great verses and I hope you got something out of them and remember this passage for it is a big one. As we reach Christmas and the season of Advent, we should always remember why we are celebrating it.

FAITH, FAMILY AND GOOD NEWS TO SHARE

By Wesley Jones

Hebrews 1:1-4

Good News for Modern Man, *The New Testament in Today's English Version!* That was the name of the first Bible given to me by my parents and the folks at Hester Baptist Church. My belief in God, Jesus and the life he led started early, as church was a big part of our family's life growing up in Oxford, NC. We really did not have an option of attending; it was just something we did. My parents grew up attending church regularly, two separate churches, and when they married and started our family, they made absolutely sure we were raised the same way. Daddy was a smart man as the decision of which church to attend was pretty simple.... we went to Hester as that is where Momma attended! They were relentless in keeping us exposed to the Word and the Good News that was available to us. I don't think that I really understood back then what any of it meant, but I knew they believed strongly. Their beliefs drove the potential for mine. I believed because they believed.

I became a Presbyterian when I married Brenda and we started attending White Memorial. A lesson learned from Daddy! We progressively became more involved and when Haley, Kelton and Lucas started showing up, we were all in. I started to hear the message more plainly. Faith in what you cannot see, grace, mercy, hope, forgiveness and love. I have learned so much about these things and still have so much more to learn. These concepts can certainly prove to be difficult at times, especially for an imperfect soul such as myself in an imperfect world. Our world can be quite troubling, but there is always beauty to be found and opportunities for spiritual growth. Beauty recently provided to our family occurred with the arrival of grandchildren Brooks, Lillian and Jasper!

Beauty and understanding of the Word are offered by Jesus for all; anyone can have them for the asking. Good News was offered through God speaking directly to us through the life, death and resurrection of his son Jesus, the ultimate messenger. We have all been made clean. May we remember this now during the Advent season and may we live our lives in a manner that truly reflects these ideals and freely offers them to others.

AND MARY SAID, “YES!”

By Flo Durway

Luke 1:26-38

The passage starts with an angel, an angel with a perplexing greeting, sent by God, to a nondescript, but betrothed maiden, “Rejoice, favored one.” Surprised and confused, Mary wondered about this strange greeting. Nothing in the scripture tells us that Mary was known for her devotion to God, her spiritual uniqueness, or her outstanding good deeds in the community. She even questions the angel after she hears the message that she is to conceive and bear a son, whom she is to name Jesus, and her son will be called Son of the Most High and will be put on a throne to rule without end! We, too, question God when life doesn’t go our way, but do we wish for unsolicited messages from God?

In George Bernard Shaw’s play, *Saint Joan*, Joan of Arc annoys the king when she tells him she hears God’s voice and he asks, “Why don’t the voices come to me? I am the king.” Joan responds, “They do come to you, but you do not hear them.” Mary heard the voice. Suppose God sent us a message! Would we hear it? More importantly, how would we respond to it? Mary shows no enthusiasm, but neither does she resist, as she says to the angel, “let it be with me as you have said.”

The lovely Advent hymn, “No Wind at the Window,” captures this passage in Luke and shows us in the last verse just how unbelievable the message is and how clear the response is:

*No payment was promised, no promises made
No wedding was dated, no blue print displayed
Yet Mary, consenting to what none could guess
Replied with conviction, “tell God I say yes.”*

As we reflect on Mary’s story, may we be alert to God’s voice and be willing to say, “YES!”

THE GOD OF HUMILITY

By Jeff Siker

Luke 2:1-7

In these few verses Luke begins by contrasting the stage of world power (Roman emperor and governor) with the backwater town of Bethlehem in occupied Palestine. But already in Luke 1 Mary has sung a song of praise to God highlighting her faith in the God who sides with the downtrodden rather than with the seemingly powerful. God is a God of reversal. She will give birth to Jesus in a lowly manger, yet he will grow to live into his mother's faith in this powerful God of humility. Jesus also will preach the good news of God's empowering presence among the poor and needy (Luke 4:16-30), fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy.

We often romanticize the story of Jesus' birth, partly because of our tendency to conflate Matthew's birth story with Luke's birth story. But the two stories have striking differences and make different points. While in Matthew we witness the birth of a royal king (at home!) in Bethlehem, in Luke we know the story of Mary giving birth in a manger, an animal stall, because there is "no room in the inn." While in Matthew the infant king receives royal gifts from the wise men, in Luke we find a stark contrast between the powerful and the lowly. How is it that even a woman giving birth can find no grace, no accommodation, no mercy from those who have shelter? Instead, Mary is forced to give birth in the equivalent of a back alley. We tend to add gentle snow-flakes and the warmth of a bucolic scene with sheep and shepherds, both in our hymns and in art, all to make the retelling of the story more palatable. But in truth Jesus is born into a harsh and unforgiving world.

And yet, Luke's point is precisely that in coming among us, as one of us, God has chosen a birth of humility, which will lead to a ministry of empowering the lowly and preaching a gospel of challenging reversal. In turn this ministry will conclude with a shameful and scandalous death, only to find the greatest reversal yet to come in God's unexpected raising of Jesus from the dead to new life, a life that continues among us through the grace of God's Spirit.

GOD IS FAITHFUL

By Nathan Goettsch

Freshman, Enloe High School

John 1:1-14

Merry Christmas to everyone! On this Christmas day I invite you to look at John 1:1-14 with me. I believe that it is one of the strongest passages in the Bible. As we analyze this text one section really stands out:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (NIV)

I invite you to take a second to think about these questions:

How does this passage provide hope?

What does this passage tell you about who God is?

What is the overall message?

For me I believe that this passage provides hope based on the fact that God was always there and that he will always be there, it is assuring in a way. That is also what I take away as the message, that God will always be there, that he will always be by our side. What this says about God for me is that he is devoted to us and cares about us more than anyone else could or does. I believe that we should be faithful to God just as he is faithful to us.

An exercise that might be interesting to try as you go about your day is to read different versions of this passage and think about the differences and if the meaning stays the same throughout multiple Bible translations.