

Sunday, December 22, 2013: Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25

by [Daniel Harrell](#) in the [December 11, 2013](#) issue

The Christmas story includes the very sordid tale of an engaged young woman who is apparently cheating on her fiancé. She's carrying somebody else's baby. She says that God did it, which adds blasphemy to the infidelity. Ancient law allowed for the jilted Joseph to stone Mary, but preferring to keep the scandal out of the papers, he decides to break it off quietly and save everybody any further embarrassment.

The whole thing was a miserable mess. And as Joseph would eventually discover, it was all God's doing. So then why make everything look so *ungodly*? Why all the secrecy? Why not a blaze of public, visible Holy Spirit glory following a pregnant Mary? That way her neighbors could have thrown her a baby shower with swaddling clothes from Baby Gap. Somebody could have made sure there were posh accommodations at the Bethlehem Hilton. Better yet, why not just skip the whole birth process entirely? Spare Joseph the painful humiliation and Mary the painful labor. Spare Jesus the hazardous temptations of adolescence. It's not like he did anything for his first 30 years anyway. Better yet, show up on earth on Good Friday and you're back in heaven by Sunday.

Instead, the church insists that the death and resurrection of Jesus be contingent on his obedient life. Jesus takes away our sins, but he also gives us his hard-earned righteousness. This insistence on Jesus' obedient life relies on some dicey math. Christians believe that Jesus was totally God and totally human. As the Nicene Creed affirms: "Jesus Christ . . . true God from true God . . . incarnate from the Virgin Mary . . . made man for our sake . . ."

On the one hand, Jesus walked on water, rose from the dead and read people's minds. On the other hand, Jesus had no idea when he'd come back to earth, couldn't tell who touched him after some healing power went out of his body, was surprised by the faith of a Roman centurion, and got talked into changing his mind by a gentile woman—of all people—who needed a demon cast out of her daughter. What sort of savior behaves so unpredictably?

The Creed may provide an unintentional hint when it describes Jesus as “Light from light.” Light behaves as unpredictably as God himself, and with the same sort of dual nature as Jesus. Every morning when you look in the mirror, you see only 95 percent of your reflection because only 95 percent of the bathroom light reflects off the mirror. The other 5 percent of the light goes *through* the mirror. Light behaves both as true wave—bouncing back from solid surfaces that reflect it—and as true particle—bouncing off but also breaching those same reflective surfaces. We don’t know which will bounce and which will breach. Fire a photon at a mirror and there’s literally no way to predict whether it will bounce back or pass through. Light by its very dual nature is predictably unpredictable.

Up until the discovery of light’s quirky (some might say quarky) behavior, nature’s constant predictability testified to the reliability of God. You could count on the Lord like the sun rising in the morning. But upon the discovery of quantum reality, nature no longer proved so reliable. Not only do some particles of light penetrate mirrors, but single particles exist in multiple places at the same time. What sort of Creator creates this way?

According to Matthew, Jesus was born of a woman only that the “Scripture might be fulfilled.” He refers to Isaiah 7: “The young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.” However, given Isaiah’s context, it’s highly unlikely that the prophet was talking about Mary giving birth, since the birth that Isaiah predicted occurred in his own lifetime. Israel’s King Ahaz was in dire straits and needed divine help to fight his Assyrian enemies. Eager to help, God pressed Ahaz to ask for a sign, but Ahaz, feigning modesty, demurred. He wanted to do things on his own. God gave him a sign anyway: a young woman will have a baby and name it Immanuel.

It wasn’t much of a sign. Women have babies everyday. But that was the point. God being with Ahaz meant God letting nature take its course. Assyria was strong enough to take down Israel any day of the week. So the Lord let them do it.

Yet Isaiah 7 is only the beginning of a string of events about a child and the name Immanuel. Matthew is thinking about the whole narrative arc when he speaks of scripture’s fulfillment. In Isaiah 8, Immanuel applies to the entire people of God coming under Assyrian attack. God not only lets Assyria run them over, but by being with his people he gets run over too. Then in Isaiah 9, Immanuel resurfaces as a child born of redemption: “His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, the

Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6, KJV). The ordinary child born in Isaiah 7 as a sign of failure unpredictably gives way to the extraordinary child prophesied in chapter 9 as a sign of salvation.

How can Jesus be both fully man and fully God? How can our salvation come through failure? How does scandal pave the way for righteousness? How does a cross lead to life? Jesus died and rose but now abides in his people. His kingdom has come but is not yet here. God creates and redeems with reliable unpredictability. Look in the mirror and see.