

SESSION 3



FOR UNTO US A CHILD IS BORN

NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR

Handel and Jennens' use of an ancient text about a promised and promising birth invites us to analyze how old words can take on new meanings. As we follow the ways in which these words from Isaiah are recontextualized even within the Bible itself, we may gain a deeper appreciation of what it means for prophecy to be fulfilled. In a sense, it is "filled full," as new meanings are poured into the waiting words. Some participants may find this idea somewhat unsettling, especially if they have grown up thinking of prophecy in a purely predictive sense. Yet this way of describing the fulfillment of prophecy is not intended to diminish the inspiration of the original prophetic words. It does, however, shift the emphasis from the magical to the miraculous. What could be more of a miracle, after all, than inspired words being recycled for God's own purposes throughout the centuries!

This session is also about the way in which Scripture comes to claim us personally. It is one thing to appreciate the way in which ancient words became new as the community of faith sought to reapply them to their own situations. It is another to recognize that these words are God's words for us in *our own* situations.

As I wrote this session I could not help but think of Woody Allen's movie, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*. It tells the story of a woman who goes to the movies every day to escape the dullness of her daily routine. For a while it looks as if she's succeeding. The movie theater becomes her world, the characters her closest friends. She is so intimate with one particular movie, that her lips move right along with the dialogue of the actors.

But then one day something bizarre happens. One of the characters stops in mid-sentence, turns, and speaks *to her*. She is, of course, terribly confused, and not just because this sort of thing just isn't supposed to happen. No, for her the most unnerving part is that the dialogue is all wrong. Suddenly, the characters are asking her questions and waiting for answers. Their story has become her story, and she must decide how to respond.

My hope for you and for the participants in this session is that there will come a moment when these texts turn and start speaking directly to you. You may find it to be a little confusing, especially if it has never happened before. It will require a response. Yet once it has happened, you will never be able to hear the phrases “For unto us a child is born” and “Emmanuel—God with us” in the same way again. “Us,” after all, means *us!*

SESSION PLANS

Learning Objectives

This session is intended to enable participants to:

1. Summarize the historical and political situation which confronted Ahaz in Isaiah 7:1-17.
2. Identify at least one interpretation of Isaiah 9:1-7 which makes sense in its original historical context.
3. Place the date of the Isaiah passages on a timeline.
4. Describe some of the ways in which Matthew may have recontextualized Isaiah 7 and 9 in his Gospel.
5. Summarize how these passages have been interpreted musically and theologically in Handel's *Messiah*.

Resources You May Need

A picture, print, or painting with several frames

A chalkboard or newsprint, easel and markers

One or more props for the play (nametags, a crown, a sandwich board)

Copies of Participants' Resources 1A and 3A

A compact disc player and a compact disc of Handel's *Messiah*

Copies of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”

Leadership Strategy

SETTING THE STAGE

1. One of the most important concepts for this session is “recontextualization.” In order to make this easier to grasp, it might be helpful to begin with a graphic illustration of it. Bring along a photo, print, or painting with several appropriately sized and widely varied frames. (Make sure you choose something that is large enough for everyone to see.) As you switch the frames, ask participants to comment on the effect. (For instance, do certain frames bring out particular colors? Textures? Figures?) Invite those who are willing to share experiences they may have had with hearing a Scripture passage in a fresh way because of the particular situation in which they found themselves personally. You may want to be ready to begin with a brief example of your own.

and/or

Poll the group as to which person they identified with most strongly in the “Christmas Eve Congregation” illustration at the beginning of this session in the *Resource Book*. Then invite participants to talk about why they identified with one or the other, and whether their sense of identification changed at all as a result of preparing for this session. (In other words, do they identify with a different person now than the one with whom they identified initially?) Be sure to share your own responses, but be careful not to dominate the discussion.

EXPLORING THE SCRIPTURE

1. Present a minilecture on the historical and political context of Isaiah 7:1-17. Remember that the previous sessions have dealt with the Babylonian Exile, so you will want to preface what you say by “turning back the clock” from the 6th century B.C.E. to the 8th century B.C.E. Information you will need for your remarks may be found on pages 29-31 of the *Resource Book*, in *Understanding the Old Testament* or in the text of the play in Participants’ Resource 3A.

and/or

Have volunteers act out Isaiah 7:1-17 using the play in Participants’ Resource 3A. You will only need copies for the people playing the narrator, Isaiah and Ahaz.

The success of this activity will depend in large part on whether your group has a sense of fun. There is no need to rehearse. In fact, spontaneity will probably

add to the enjoyment. The only thing the actors will need to do is to listen carefully and react appropriately.

You will want to give some thought in advance to where you would like the actors to stand. In the first scene, for instance, Jotham, Ahaz, and the townspeople could be seated toward the front of the “stage,” with Rezin and Pekah conspiring behind them.

The number of props used is really up to you, although you should probably avoid anything too elaborate. Large nametags for the different characters would be helpful. A crown for Jotham to hand down to Ahaz would also add a nice touch. If you'd like to pick up on Shear-jashub's role as a “walking billboard,” you might want to have him wear a sandwich board with the words, “A-Remnant-Shall-Return.”

Participants will notice that I have included Ahaz' young wife as an actual character in the second scene. This, of course, is an interpretive decision based on who scholars think “the young woman” in verse 14 might have been. You may want to point this out when you cast this particular part.

and

Ask group members to add the “Syro-Ephraimitic War” of 733 B.C.E. at the appropriate place on the timeline in Participants' Resource 1A. Or, add this war to the timeline you prepared on newsprint in Sessions One and Two. As you do so, review the “aliases” of the countries involved (that is: Syria's alias is Aram and Israel's alias is Ephraim). It might also help to point out that even though this was called the Syro-Ephraimitic War, Syria and Ephraim were on the same side.

2. Ask participants to close their eyes and open their imaginations. Then read the following statement:

Your name is Matthew. You are a first-century Jew and a follower of the one they call Jesus, the Christ. You have heard talk over the years that Jesus' father was not Joseph, but the Holy Spirit. Though there is no way to prove this, it certainly would explain a lot about your own encounters with Jesus—both before and after his resurrection!

One day you are doing what you love to do best—studying the Scriptures. You are reading from the Greek translation of the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Suddenly, the words rivet you to attention. “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,” it says, “and they shall name him Emmanuel.”

Emmanuel—God with us! It makes so much sense. Funny, you'd never thought of it that way before.

After a few minutes, invite group members to name the central features of Matthew's "frame." Encourage responses by asking:

- What did Matthew know about Jesus?
- What was his purpose in writing a Gospel?

Ask participants to open their eyes. Then use this activity as a bridge into a brief discussion of the ways in which Isaiah 7:14 has been recontextualized by Matthew. One way to do this is to ask everyone to read Matthew 1:18-25. After they read, they are to note ways in which Matthew's circumstances differ from those when Isaiah 7:14 was written. For additional information participants may want to scan the introduction to Matthew in a study Bible.

You may want to clarify that these questions are not intended as an assault on the doctrine of the virgin birth. They are only intended to help us appreciate the way in which one Gospel writer may have recontextualized an Old Testament passage in light of what he knew about Jesus Christ.

or

Draw a large frame on the board, with the text of Isaiah 7:14 written in the center. Label the frame "Matthew's context." Then invite participants to brainstorm for words or phrases which would describe Matthew's context as a first-century follower of Jesus Christ. What sorts of things were being said about Jesus' birth, life, and death? Write these on the frame. Then draw lines connecting anything in the frame to relevant phrases in the verse. (See the above comment about this activity's not being intended as an assault on the virgin birth. Be prepared for the question to arise about how this way of thinking about the recontextualization process affects our understanding of the inspiration of Scripture, but don't force the issue.)

3. Ask participants to turn to the libretto of *Messiah* at the back of their *Resource Books*. Note how Handel and Jennens have arranged the pieces between the Alto Recitative ("Behold, a virgin shall conceive"; I.7) and the Pastoral Symphony (I.12) to tell the story of Jesus' conception and birth. In between the conception in I.7 and the birth announcement ("For unto us"; I.11) are various texts from Isaiah reflecting on the significance and joy of the Messiah's coming. Several of

them, including the text from Isaiah 9:2, are tied together by images of light shining through darkness.

and

Play the pieces listed below in succession. You may want to preface them with the following “listening alerts”:

- notice how the key shifts from minor to major as the text moves from walking in darkness to seeing a great light.
- listen for the “sunburst” as “For unto us” bursts on the scene. In this way the music fulfills the light which dawns with the birth it describes.

PLAY: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive” (I.7; duration :35)

“The people that walked in darkness” (I.10; duration 3:30)

“For unto us a child is born” (I.11; duration 4:19)

CLOSING

1. Sing or read the words to “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” This may either be done in unison, or with individuals taking the verses and the entire group joining in on the chorus: “Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!”

or

Introduce the person selected at the last session to read the story of the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:13-27. Then close with prayer, thanking God for the miracle of Scripture and its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, God With Us.

Looking Ahead

1. In activity #2 under Setting the Stage in the next session it is suggested you use a slide presentation to accompany the Pastoral Symphony. See the activity for details. If you are not a skilled photographer, ask for a volunteer from the group. The music lasts approximately three minutes.
2. In activity #3 under Exploring the Scripture it is suggested group members display artistic representations of Jesus as the Good Shepherd which they have located at home, or in the church or public library. Encourage participants to look for such illustrations in the time between this and the next session.

Participants' Resource 3A

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Conduit

A Play Based on Isaiah 7 and 2 Kings 16

Characters in Scene One:

Tiglath-pileser, King of Assyria

Jotham, King of Judah

Rezin, King of Aram/Syria

Ahaz, Jotham's son

Pekah, King of Israel/Ephraim

Townsppeople (2 or 3 will do)

Characters in Scene Two:

Isaiah of Jerusalem

Shear-jashub, his young son

Ahaz, King of Judah

Young wife of Ahaz

Scene One

The scene takes place in and around Jerusalem. As the scene opens, the characters should be in their places, ready to respond to the action as described by the narrator.

Narrator: Once upon a time—the 8th century B.C.E. to be exact—**King Rezin** of Syria and **King Pekah** of Israel made an alliance against **Tiglath-pileser**, the dreaded King of Assyria (“Tiggy” to his friends). Rezin and Pekah tried to get little Judah to join them, but King Jotham politely refused. Rezin and Pekah did not like to take no for an answer, especially since it would mean having someone they couldn't trust at their rear flank. So they cooked up a plot to overthrow Jotham and install their own puppet king in Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, back in Jerusalem, **King Jotham** died, leaving his young son **Ahaz** holding the bag. When Ahaz and the people of Jerusalem got wind of what Rezin and Pekah were planning, their hearts “shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.”

What was a young, inexperienced king to do? The logical thing would be to appeal to Tiggy for help. But was that the only option? Stay tuned for the exciting conclusion.

Scene Two

Narrator: As our scene opens, **Ahaz** and **his young wife** are taking their evening stroll along the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller's Field. What with the political situation heating up, Ahaz seems nervous and overwrought.

Suddenly, the couple is confronted by the prophet Isaiah and his young son, A-Remnant-
Shall-Return. (It's one of those newfangled hyphenated names.) Without so much as a
"how do you do," Isaiah confronts the fretful Ahaz and commands:

Isaiah: Listen up, relax, and don't be afraid. Don't let those two hot-shots, Rezin and
Pekah, get to you. For thus says the Lord God (more or less):

*They're only human. Don't let all their bluster and bravado fool you into think-
ing they are anything more. This will all blow over. You'll see—they won't
amount to a thing. As for you—stand firm in faith or you won't stand at all.*

Well, don't just stand there looking skeptical. You don't believe me? Ask God for a sign.
Anything, ask for anything at all. Come on—the sky's the limit.

Ahaz: Oh, really—I wouldn't dream of it. Now, if you'll just excuse us . . .

Isaiah: Of all the nerve! Here's your sign whether you want it or not. Congratulations, the
young woman is with child. (Oh, I see I've finally got your attention!) She shall bear a
son, and shall call his name Immanuel. By the time he's old enough to tell the difference
between good and evil, the siege will be over and he'll be feasting on curds and honey.
And as for Rezin and Pekah—they'll be history. [This, to Shear-jashub:] "Come on, son.
Let's go back to the prophetic circle. At least there I get some respect!"

(With this, Isaiah and Shear-jashub exit in a huff.)

THE END