

When Matthew explains the extraordinary circumstances of the birth of Jesus Christ, he appeals to one of the greatest, if not the greatest, prophecies of the Old Testament: Isaiah 7:14: “*Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.*”

There are hundreds of prophecies in the Old Testament that describe and prepare for the Messiah, but none quite like this one. Isaiah himself prefaces it in a very explicit way, as we heard in the first reading. He goes to the king at the time, Ahaz, and challenges him to ask God for a sign, to perform a miracle. “*And let this miracle,*” he says, “*be high as the heavens and deep as sheol.*” In other words, let this miracle be the greatest thing possible, something greater than the whole cosmos.

The king defers. But what, in retrospect, could he ask for? How can any man know what such a miracle would be? Anything man could conceive would still be limited by his concept of the universe. (For that matter, such a miracle is even beyond the ability of the highest angel in heaven or hell to conceive). Isaiah is challenging Ahaz to rise to the level of God, or perhaps humbling him for daring to think too much of himself.

Isaiah tells him not to worry, because God himself will give this sign, and then he proceeds to articulate the prophecy, word for word as he has received it from the mouth of the Lord: “*the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel.*”

That a virgin should conceive a son would certainly be a great miracle (presuming this prophecy is being spoken literally, but many people would interpret “*virgin*” to simply mean a young woman about to be married). But even if the prophecy referred to a miracle of nature by which a child is conceived through a special power of God, it is still not clear how that would be something higher than the highest heavens, and deeper than Sheol. It is still a miracle very much within the universe, and within nature. Perhaps it is the second part that makes it something outstanding: the child to be born will be called “*Emmanuel,*” a Hebrew name which means, as St. Matthew explains to his Greek audience, “*God is with us.*” Here too, however, it remains ambiguous, because many prophets and holy men received names that referred to God in some way (Isai-Jah, Jeremi-Jah, Ezeke-El, Dani-El, etc.). The exact meaning of this prophecy, and how it is the greatest possible miracle God can accomplish, will remain to be revealed only when it is actually fulfilled.

Thus it is that prophecy is both direct and clear, and at the same time hidden and obscure. Thus it is that its fulfillment confirms the prophecy by actually revealing its full meaning, unveiling and completing it. Only with the coming of the Messiah, does the Old Testament become clear.

What God prophesied through Isaiah he fulfilled in Mary, in a literal way. Exactly what Isaiah said, happened: a *virgin* conceived. Mary and Joseph were the first to encounter the great sign prophesied by Isaiah, and each of them required the visit of an Archangel to appreciate how this child was not conceived in the ordinary course of nature, but by the Holy Spirit. God was intervening to accomplish something higher than nature.

And what God prophesied through Isaiah he also fulfilled in a literal way, when he said the child to be born would be “Emmanuel,” *God-with-us*. Here is something greater than the heavens, deeper than the abyss. Here is something no man or angel, not even the highest angel in heaven or hell, could begin to conceive or comprehend: God who made the world, entered the world; God who created man in His image, became man, born as a baby.

Everything God said through Isaiah was true and exact. Yet until the Messiah actually was born and revealed to be Son of God by his miracles, death, and Resurrection, those words of Isaiah would remain obscure, and unintelligible. Now they are seen in their full splendor, and all creation is indeed humbled.

Two thousand years later we continue to marvel. It is not possible to understand how God could become man, how the one “through whom all things were made” can be born as a helpless baby. There is no created mind that can comprehend. This is a sign that confounds the haughty and proud, but brings joy to the humble. Christmas is an invitation to contemplate, marvel, and be in awe of the greatness of God. There is nothing greater or more profound than what we behold, with Mary and Joseph, in the crib at Bethlehem.

With them to lead and guide us, let us too, come and behold him. And though we do not pretend or presume to offer explanation, let us invite others to see something that God has done, a sign higher than the heavens, and deeper than the earth.