

Risky Business

It would have been a lot easier if he had been conceived in the normal way. But as it stands, it's turning out to be a test of faith not one bit easier than that of Abraham when asked to lay down his son the altar. Two people, Mary and Joseph, find themselves in the midst of a tremendously challenging circumstance. Very few have ever had to stand on such precarious ground. Such a treacherous path lies before them in relation to each other and with God. But is it any easier for the One who rides "this big" in her womb?

But it is of such tests of human resilience that true encounters with God are made of. If you never take a risk, you'll never know what's possible through in faith. Ah, but I could *fail*, you say. Yes. Faith is a risky business. And the most brilliant success and most crushing defeat lie within a hair's breadth of each other. And I wonder how many fail, not out of any lack of nerve or intelligence, but simply because, when it comes right down to it, they can't be bothered. . . ?

But I'm assuming today that you *want* to increase your faith. You *want* to know God more intimately? You *want* to love God more fully? I think it's a fair assumption to say we would want such a vibrant spirituality that if a stranger happened to come into our midst they would say, "God is *with* that man. God is *with* that woman? God is with these people. God is with us. Immanuel!

Ah, but no one likes to take a *test*.

A generation after Jesus, near the end of the first century, a Christian writer in a Roman world studies the scroll of Isaiah the prophet. In his contemplations of these sacred Scriptures, he uses a method of interpretation quite popular at that time, whereby a singular verse of scripture could be taken completely out of its original, context and put into a totally new story and given a completely new meaning that which was revealed to an inspired writer or teacher in only in the moment in which he lived and wrote and spoke. To take a verse of Scripture, God's holy Word, and completely reinterpret it in a brand new way, I think you would agree, would be a *very risky business*.

But as this gospel writer near the end of the first century contemplated the story of Jesus' birth, as he put himself into the sandals of the bewildered couple coming to terms with angelic visions and an amazing pregnancy, he has one of those *holy moments*. He realizes that in the experience of this miraculous birth is the fulfilment of a verse in Isaiah:

"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel."

It's interesting to note, (and this is an often conveyed misconception in popular Christmas presentations), that there was no particular interest in this verse during pre-Christian times. The Jewish world was *not* expecting their messiah to come into the world like this. *They* were waiting for a sky-splitting, chariot-riding, sword-wielding, death-dealing warrior king. A Power to rule from David's throne. One who would conquer the world by war.

They'd been wrong.

They has misread their Scriptures.

For centuries.

Yet this gospel writer longs for the world to know just how wrong they had been. Longs for all the world to know the Prince of peace. He knows some will accuse him of blaspheme. But this gospel writer picks up his pen and writes: "All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet. . . ." (Mat 1:22,23)

The Word of God is a living word. It has . . .

Continually New Meaning

The New Testament writers saw the Old Testament as one long prophecy to be read in the present moment in the light of Jesus the Christ. But the gospel writers wanted their readers not only to *read* about the test of faith in bringing Jesus into the world, the gospel writers wanted to set the same test before each new reader. We too must take the risk to bring Christ into our world. Whether it be the Roman world or the present day, faith is always risky business. Faith always sets before us some kind of a *test*.

The story of Jesus' birth is a risky story to tell. A risky story to take seriously. It is counter-intuitive, it's facts unable to be verified. It hard to believe. It is a very *unlikely* story.

And yet, (and again, another point not usually mentioned in contemporary Christmas presentations) it was a *common* story in the ancient world. Legendary heroes were often conceived by the gods and born under unusual circumstances. It was virtually *expected* that anyone of any great importance in this world would *have to have* something unusual about their birth.

But unlike those ancient myths that hardly anyone even knows anymore, *this* one the church continues to tell, because there's something in the story of Jesus' birth of great value. Something beyond the marvel of virgin birth. The story points us towards a more fundamental truth: From the moment of his conception Jesus was totally unique. When people encountered him, they were encountering the very God of love. And he called them to follow him at all costs. Love one another at all costs. Risk everything for love.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength and love your neighbour as yourself.”

But would it be it worth it? Would *you* follow Jesus knowing you could end up on a Roman cross, or at the very least, disowned by your community and family and friends? Would it be *worth* the *risk* if Jesus was anything *less* than both the son of David AND the Son of God, Saviour of the world?

The gospel writers in telling this story knew they were asking real people to gamble with their very real lives. But the gospel writers were very persuasive because they were, above all, talented tellers of Bible stories.

In reading Matthew 2, we must realize there is a back-story to this – an Old Testament story – that goes along with it. Often neglected, this OT story will take us deeper into meaning of Jesus' birth. Behind Matthew 2:23 stand Isaiah 7:14 which belongs to . . .

The Story of Ahaz.

So let's do the opposite of the gospel writer: if he took the verse out of it's historical context and applied it to the present time, let's put it back in and see what happens. This is the story of Ahaz.

Once upon a time there was a very insecure young king named Ahaz. He is insecure, first of all because his father Jotham still alive, and Ahaz is acting only as *regent*, and has yet to be confirmed as a real king in the eyes God and the people. And furthermore, these were critical days for the House of David. This young king has inherited a most difficult situation. The powerful Assyrian Empire is moving in to establish it's authority in the region. But the neighbouring kingdoms, the other small players, Edom, Moab, and even the estranged brother

kingdom in the North, have been pressuring Ahaz, the rookie king, the green, untested king to join with them in rebelling against the Assyrian ambitions. Be a man, Ahaz. Join the club. Be one of the boys. And they've bullied and badgered to the point of attacking Jerusalem, all in a effort to bring Ahaz on side in this futile rebellion. But Ahaz is smart enough to know kings end up dead doing stuff like this.

But one thing he's got going for him is the prophet Isaiah has been around since the days of Ahaz' grandfather. He is a true prophet. A seasoned veteran. And Isaiah has consistently warned Ahaz not to join the rebellion. Encouraged the young king to *work with* the Assyrians – appease them. Find the middle way. This is the test of a truly wise man. But with the surrounding kingdoms in this unneighborly alliance, Ahaz is understandably alarmed. (Read 7:2) Ahaz is shaking in his boots.

But the LORD sends Isaiah the prophet to the nervous young king to tell him not to worry. Those conspiring enemies will end up as “smoldering stumps.” Ahaz must *somehow* learn in this to trust God. (Read 9b)

But the main thing he must learn is that whenever God tests us, there is always . . .

The counter-test .

This is not just a mighty God bringing a terrible ordeal on a mere mortal. God himself is also equally willing to take the test. Trust me on this one Ahaz. On the line here is the security of David's throne. And remember the promise to David? “There will never fail to be a “son of David” to sit on David's throne.

I *promised*.

So God is also taking a risk. If Ahaz, who now sits on David's throne, fails to *live long enough* to produce an heir for David's throne, then the promise will have been broken. Now, is that even possible? A promise God made would be broken? The promise was not just made to Ahaz, a fairly *mediocre* king by all accounts, but to the Son of David, the “Messiah” – the eternal king, a king on the eternal throne. Trust me on this one Ahaz. You not the one taking the risk here. I AM.

So go ahead, ask me for a sign – you name it. Do you want Moses to come have a little talk with you? Maybe bring the stone tablets. Can be arranged. Do you want the Sun to stand still in the sky for a while? No problem. Because I'm not asking you to stand firm in faith without giving you something to *believe in*.

So although God is not offering Ahaz a no-risk deal, *God* is really the one being tested here to prove himself Sovereign over a situation in which, from a purely humanly standpoint a mediocre king with at best average diplomatic skills and below average warrior skills isn't likely to survive.

So, go ahead Ahaz, ask for a *sign*.

“Ahhhh. . .” No way! That's just a . . .

“A little too controversial “ 11

I mean, in a way, he's right to be cautious about this. But actually Ahaz is trying to bluff his way through. Sometimes a *little* knowledge can be dangerous. Ahaz is *not* known as a man of faith. He's a king, a soldier, a diplomat, a politician. He doesn't want to get involved with the spiritual stuff. Because he's afraid he will make a mistake. With his luck, he'll will ask God for something really stupid and God will laugh in his face, and he will end up looking foolish in the eyes of world. No way! He will not take that risk.

And he knows a little bit about this kind of stuff, knows his grandfather had messed around doing priestly things in the Temple and look what happened to him! Ended up with leprosy. And isn't there some kind of law, like, "do not test the Lord"? Ahaz knows a little about this. Know a little bit *about* God. But really, like many people who have a million excuses, for avoiding God, Ahaz is simply someone who for various reason is incapable of a serious spiritual interaction with God – even second-hand through his prophet.

He is unwilling to take the risk of "inquiring" of the LORD. Too proud to say, "God, I need you to show me something. "

So he tries to bluff his way through.

But Isaiah refuses to accept Ahaz's excuses. He asks, in effect in v 13. . .

Are you a sucker for punishment?

When God sets a test before someone, sure, it is never easy, but skipping out on the test is just not an option. Isaiah says Ahaz, on the one hand, your , "trying the patience of human beings. " There's a growing discontent with your refusal to join this rebellion. Everybody's scared about what's going to happen next. But at the same time, Ahaz you are also, "trying the patience of God." You need to make up your mind: if you're not going to throw your in lot with the neighbouring kings you need to ask God for a sign, trust in God to deliver on his promise, and embrace whatever will come.

But Ahaz is incapable of making that choice. So, the Scripture says, "Therefore the LORD himself will give you a sign. . . " And

This particular sign would in and of itself be the proof that God is with them

The sign would be the birth of an heir to the throne. In this case, a normal baby would be conceived the normal way, but still, conception is always unpredictable, and there's always a fifty percent chance it would be a *girl*, which wouldn't help out in the heir-to-the-throne department. . But you just wait Ahaz. The day you hold that little baby boy in your hands, you will know that I will always keep my promise. And before that little boy is old enough to know right from wrong, "he'll be eating curds and honey" – in other words times will be good you won't be eating war-time rations anymore. And those enemies you dread right now will be gone. But is it a happy ending for Ahaz? What do you think?

So how does it end? Well, we must conclude that the story of Ahaz is one of . . .

A uncompleted spiritual journey

In **2 Kings 16:10-18** we read of how Ahaz finally gets to visit his hero, the mighty King of Assyrian and sees how a *real* king lives and how a *real* king worships. He sees the impressive city and the king's altar in Damascus. He likes that altar and wants one just like it. Becomes fascinated with all things Assyrian. Because Ahaz is religious enough, but his real gods are idols. So Ahaz decides to redesign the Temple and change the style of worship . . .

And then we read the fateful words that really tell the story of this man:

***"He did this for the King of Assyria."* (18)**

Ahaz went about removing from his life anything that might give offense to his pagan overlord. **Anything that might mark him as a worshiper of Israel's God. God himself had given Ahaz a sign.** But Ahaz just couldn't or *wouldn't* take the risk of faith of living by faith.

People like Ahaz will always side with those in power. Because power is the one sign that

this world understands. But this kind of power is driving our world, on a daily basis, closer and closer to the brink of destruction. This kind of power robs the poor of justice. This kind of power accepts the subtle compromises to protect its place of privilege in the world.

This kind of power uses us and then leaves shallow and incomplete people.

The Ahaz story is a warning in this prosperous land against bowing to the great powers of this world, those drunk on that power, who frighten the poor nations, driving them to seek the favor of the powerful as if they were *gods*.

But Old Testament stories are always stories of uncompleted journeys. People who are missing something. Some find it, some don't. The Old Testament stories always foreshadow a completion – a fulfilment. And so it came to pass seven centuries after Ahaz was laid in his grave a weary couple are on . . .

The Bethlehem Road

This too, is a story not only of a test, but of a *counter-test*. In the birth of Christ, God asked Joseph and Mary to take an *enormous* risk. But on the other had, think of the risk taken by God himself! Entrusting his Son to human parents. Sending his only begotten as a helpless baby into the world.

Now, if we follow in the steps of the gospel writers, and if interpret what *they* wrote as they once interpreted what the *prophets* wrote long before *them*, then we must read this story believing that God *still* is moving in *our day* mysteriously planting evermore of his marvelous secrets in our lives, so that one day faithful people who will come *after* us – children, grandchildren, generations yet unborn – will look back on our lives and realize that *we passed the test*.

And they, like us will have to choose the way of Ahaz or the way of Mary and Joseph. But if they take the risk and embrace God plans and intentions for their lives, they will move in the right direction.

But first, like Mary and Joseph, we must first pass the test.

Their's is a story of trust in the power of God. For they were the *powerless*. What moved these two through dark, quiet night towards Bethlehem was their love for each other and for the child that was to be born.

Did anyone believe their story?

Didn't matter.

Some shepherd boys did.

Then some traveling Magi.

Because they saw a *sign*: "a child wrapped in clothes and laying in a manger."

And when they *saw* the *sign*, they knew they could take the risk.

They found the faith and courage to live lives dedicated to human love, dignity, justice and peace.

People who live like that, on the risky edge, are the signs to the world.

There are signs everywhere that people face the tests of fear and anger and bigotry and choose the greater humanity of love and justice and peace.

The ones who pass this test are usually not the ones in power, but the ordinary people who quietly make their way through the night without any media attention or mention in the headline news.

They never usually publish their memoirs and sell signed copies for fifty bucks a piece.

But they are the signs that God is with us.
What test do you face today?

Isaiah's vision, fulfilled in the birth of Jesus, calls us to a faith that serves rather than conquers, that is humble rather than dominating, that accepts suffering rather than seek vengeance. It loves.

God was willing to give a sign to a shallow nervous faithless king in his moment of despair, when he was weak, when it was all against him, but that sign was merely the foreshadowing of the birth of a lowly baby on the straw in Bethlehem whom God had destined to save the world, not by force of arms but by humbly accepting death on a cross.

God always works that way.

How silently, how silently

The wondrous gift is given!

So God imparts to human hearts

The blessings of His heaven.

No ear may hear His coming,

But in this world of sin,

Where meek souls will receive him still,

The dear Christ enters in.

Are you ready to take the risk?