

To you in Bethlehem Lutheran Church who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The virgin conceives and bears a Son. It is a sign against King Ahaz and a sign against all fallen men. That is not how we are used to hearing the verse. But it is true. The Virginal conception of Jesus Christ is a sign against our impotence. Everything we conceive is full of sin, even, saddest of all, our children. Everything we conceive dies. Our malice and our greed, our lust and violence, are passed on to our children and those sins kill them. Still, like Ahaz before us, we are too afraid to ask for a sign, too afraid of what God may say or what His Word may demand.

Ahaz had his plans, you know. He was afraid for his life and for his country. But he had a strategy. He would play off his enemies against each other. He would outsmart them. He figured he needed real and pragmatic things. The steel of Syria's swords was not imaginary or hypothetical. So he refused a sign. He rejected God's Word. Because he did not want God to interfere with his plans.

God is weary of men who fake faithfulness, who rely upon philosophy and man's wisdom to excuse themselves for their lack of faith and for their evil deeds, who twist His Word to bring it into conformity with modern sensibilities. Repent, O fearful men, who mock God with your own thoughts and philosophies of His Word and gifts.

The spirit of Ahaz is still with us. It was for early church leaders, too. In those early days there were those enemies of the Gospel who blamed their vain and imaginary zeal for missions in order to violate God's Word. Their lies have the logic of a farmer who plants the seeds of weeds because he thinks the harvest is what matters, not the purity of the seed. But such a strategy yields no harvest at all.

Imagine a man profoundly moved to pity for the starving hordes in war-torn Africa. He comes upon a warehouse full of cornmeal, 98% pure. "Why wait any longer?" He says. "Why not send the cornmeal now? They need food. We can't wait for perfect food. Men are starving! This is good enough." But rat poison is 98% corn meal. It is no good at all to starving men. It kills them despite all the good intentions and pity in the world. That 2% sounds so insignificant - until it sits on the plate in front of your child. Is it good enough? Of course not, real food is needed.

So, too, do men need the Truth of God's Word. It is the false, pretend piety of Ahaz which would make us think that WE must save the lost, that their fate rests upon OUR actions or OUR love. It lacks the confidence that God will keep His promise. Jesus Christ did not die in vain. He does not turn His back upon His children because their fathers are inadequate to the task. The mission is urgent, to be sure. The Lord will provide the workers for the harvest and He will bring it home.

Thus it is that what Ahaz would not ask, God gave, and that better than Ahaz, or even Abraham for that matter, could have imagined or hoped. The Virgin conceives and bears a Son, he is born to rescue men not merely from a pagan oppressor, a military conqueror and enslaver, but from the devil himself. Despite our lies, our rebellion, and our hatred, our philosophy, God is with us, Immanuel. God loves us. He has taken up our Flesh. He wears our skin, moves about with the muscles, bones, and cartilage of a Man. He has that Body that it might be bruised and crucified. He is one of us. He is with us. And He dies our death in our place. He has come into this dreary and deadly plane to die and to rise again to make us His, to make us one with Him. In this way He carried our sins to Hell. He crushed the seed of the serpent. In dying, He has broken down the prison bars that held us in. In rising, He has paved the way to heaven. Not because we asked, not because we prayed, not because we believed or had the facts and details right - but because He is good and His mercy endureth forever! He loves us because that is who He is and what He does. He has died our death, instituted our resurrection, and elevated our nature in His ascension to the Father's right hand. There He is our eternal advocate. But He is not contained or trapped there, for He is Emmanuel. He is with us.

He is still, and forever, God. And He is now, and forever, Man, and forever, He is with us! He comes to us, is with us, in His Word and in His Sacrament. He enters here into Bethlehem, the house of bread, on earth in bread and wine, water and word. He carries Good News from God, His faithfulness, your adoption as sons of God. He carries our prayers to His Father. He joins them to the company of heaven. He gives us righteous.

You are forgiven, you are made holy. For He is with us. This sign - the Virgin conceiving and bearing a Son, our Emmanuel, God with us - that will not be stopped by vanity, violence, or lies. The virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and he was called Jesus, in that time a common name. Its roots go deep into Israelite history being equivalent to the name Joshua, whom Moses appointed to lead Israel. Joshua means, Yahweh saves. God lead Israel through His servant Joshua into the Promised Land. From battle to battle, Joshua lead the people of Israel to victory over all the nations inhabiting the land of Canaan until it belonged to Israel. Jesus now will be the new and greater Joshua. Instead of leading the people of Israel to an earthly inheritance, Jesus will lead

the children of Abraham, all those who are baptized into His name, into an eternal inheritance. Instead of leading them across a national boundary, He will lead them across the boundary between death and life.

Where does all this occur? This occurs when you are given a new name. This occurs when a new name is placed upon you by water and the Word. In Baptism, the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is placed upon you. You are given a new name. This brings you into the family of God, in essence making you a little Christ, or in other words, a Christian.

The story is told of an early martyr of the church who clung tenaciously to his name as a little Christ. The Roman hordes had gathered about him, urging him to deny his name. They tortured him, asking him all sorts of questions. Yet all he would answer was, "I am a Christian." They asked his name, "I am a Christian." They asked from where he came, "I am a Christian," was his only reply. For him, nothing else mattered as they took his life, slowly and painfully. They needed to know nothing else but that he was a Christian.

Would we also answer those questions the same way? To me, it is easier to compromise our faith or our name in the simple daily situations of life than in the moment of death. It may be easier to confess Christ before the gunman than before your fellow students. It would come as no surprise to me if more courage to confess Christ arose in our hearts before imminent death than to confess Christ before coworkers.

It is often easier to put more trust and effort into your own name. Yet God commands, "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord, your God." When you were baptized, you were given His name. This name is not something to take lightly. This name changes who you are. Before you were given this name, you were dead in your transgressions and sins. Before you were given this name, you had no place in the kingdom of heaven. Before you were given this name, you were blind, dead and enemies of God. So what does this name mean when it is placed upon you?

The name Jesus means that God has intervened in the long lineage of sinners begun with Adam. Jesus now comes to dwell in flesh; He incarnates Himself in human flesh. When He does this, He enters with a name no

other human can ultimately fulfill. He enters with the name, Jesus. He comes to redeem the dust men of Adam's lineage by recreating them with Water and Word. Jesus, by taking the dust of flesh into Himself, comes to make the dust of Adam's line holy. Thus, Jesus receives also another name, the second Adam.

All children of God, all believers, are thus conceived. For all go the way of Christ. You were not born by the will of a man. You were born in water and in Word, born from above, and by His grace you are now Virgin-pure, even as He, your Bridegroom. And you shall follow Him, for you are called to belong to Jesus Christ. Not just in the way of the Cross, though you will drink the Cup He drank. That is not the end nor the goal. You will follow Him as He brings you in the resurrection and the ascension to come, for you are His dear saints. For behold, He is Emmanuel, God with us.

In +Jesus' Name. Amen.