

“A long, long time ago...”

Isaiah 7:10-16

Wayne Eberly

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On this final Sunday of Advent, we read one more time from the prophet Isaiah. What happens in the seventh chapter of Isaiah forms a particularly important part of the great blessing that comes with the birth of Jesus. Isaiah 7:14 is where we find this amazing promise from God. “Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel.” That promise, which was made in real time to the king of Judah known as Ahaz, was then shared by an angel with Joseph, assuring him that it was the good and right thing to do in taking Mary as his wife. Not for the first time does something that happened a long, long time ago become connected to the life of Jesus.

A long, long time ago is a phrase of great significance to people of a certain generation, including me. In 1971 Don McLean released a song with the title, “American Pie.” That song begins with the very words I have mentioned. “A long, long time ago, I can still remember how the music used to make me smile...” By all accounts, Don McLean wrote the song American Pie as a reflection on the death of Buddy Holly, the famous rock and roll singer who died in a plane crash on February 3, 1959. Writing in 1971, in his early twenties, Don McLean looked back on an event from 1959 and wrote, “A long, long time ago...” The songwriter is looking back on something that happened twelve years earlier. And he calls that a long, long time ago. Do you remember when twelve years was a long, long time ago?

When you are in your twenties, twelve years is a long, long time ago. Twelve years might take you back to when you were in grade school. Shoot, when you are young, twelve years might as well be an eternity. Two or three years, when you are young, well that feels like a lifetime. Some of my favorite stories are about kids who finish their first year of middle school, and they wander back to their grade school, reminiscing about when they were just youngsters. Well, that was a year

ago after all. So much has changed. Sometimes the families of high school graduates will gather everyone who started out in kindergarten together and compile all their pictures from, you guessed it, twelve years ago. When you are a high school graduate, twelve years truly is a long, long time ago.

Well, the song American Pie, written in 1971, spawned a whole series of articles in the year 2021. American Pie turned 50. Now, you tell me what was a long, long time ago? Fifty years! Half a century. Nixon was President. The Beatles had recently broken up. Neil Armstrong's footprints were still fresh on the moon. The Red Sox were still wallowing under the curse of the Bambino. A McDonald's hamburger cost 21 cents. A new Ford Mustang cost 29....wait for it...A new Ford Mustang cost 29 hundred dollars. Less than three thousand dollars for a brand-new Ford Mustang. A long, long time ago.

Anyway, an angel is talking to Joseph, about his soon to be wife Mary, and the angel connects the birth of Jesus with the birth of a child in the seventh chapter of Isaiah. The passage is beautiful. The passage is full of hope and promise. The passage lets us know that in Jesus Christ God will be with us, his name shall be called Immanuel. All that is missing from the words the angel speaks to Joseph is the phrase, "A long, long time ago." To a young man writing a rollicking rock and roll song in his early twenties, twelve years was a long, long time ago. To someone like me, part of that generation lost in space, looking back fifty years to when the song American Pie was written, ah yes, that was a long, long time ago. Or at least it all seems like a long, long time ago until we do the math as the angel speaks his words to Joseph.

Ahaz is the king of Judah who receives the promise that the virgin will be with a child. Ahaz was king during the years of 735-720 BCE. We are all familiar with the general date when Jesus was born. Suffice it to say the time between the prophecy in Isaiah and the birth of Jesus is longer than the long, long time ago that is twelve or even fifty years. In fact, the time between the prophecy in Isaiah and the birth of Jesus is some 700 years longer than the long, long time ago of American Pie.

Knowing that the promise about Immanuel was made a long, long time ago, that seems like something worthy of reverent reflection. The

birth of Jesus was not a hasty decision made on the part of God. The birth of Jesus was not Plan D. Plans A, B, and C all failed. Let's try Plan D. No! The birth of Jesus was not Plan D. The birth of Jesus was not God throwing up his hands in desperation and saying, "Well, I tried everything else." In football parlance, we might say the birth of Jesus was not a "Hail Mary." The birth of Jesus was part of God's divine plan, and that plan was formed a long, long time ago.

Matthew has a desire to let us know that everything taking place with the birth of Jesus had been planned a long, long time ago. The gospel begins with a genealogy of Jesus. If Ahaz was a long, long time ago and he lived in 8th century BCE, what can we say about Abraham? Let's go back, let's go back, let's go way on way back when God called Abraham to leave his father and his country and go to a new land. How can we as humans comprehend that type of planning, that type of purpose, that type of Providence, that could put together the pieces of a puzzle in such an intricate pattern that fourteen generations would pass between Abraham and David, fourteen generations between David and the exile to Babylon, and fourteen more generations between the exile to the birth of the Messiah.

Abraham and his wife Sarah encountered the barrenness of not having a child. They endured the struggles of famine, wandering around in a desperate effort to find food. Sarah created the crisis that occurred when she took things into her own hands and tried to give Abraham a son through Hagar. They were utterly and completely surprised when laughter filled their hearts with the birth of their son Isaac. The laughter of the birth turned into a desperate lament when father took son up Mount Moriah. All Matthew tells us in the genealogy is that Abraham was the father of Isaac, but we take great comfort in knowing it was all part of God's plan, a plan that was made a long, long time ago.

- Jacob wrestling with God? Part of the plan
- Joseph, who dreamed big, and whose big dreams were dashed? Joseph, who was betrayed by his brothers? Part of the plan. Part of God's good plan. Part of the plan made by the God who takes the harm humans intend and turns it into good.

- David, lining up last because he was the least of all eight sons born to Jesse, only to have it revealed that God does not look at the outward appearance. No, that is not how God looks at things. God looks at the heart. David was a man after God's own heart. David selected to be king? Part of the plan.
- The women who are mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus, names like Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, each of those women's names could have so easily been overlooked, but each in their own way demonstrate resourcefulness, courage, faith, and trust. Part of the plan.
- Read the genealogy of Jesus and you will find around the 23rd generation the name Ahaz. Yes, that Ahaz, who was king of Judah in the years of 735-720 BCE, and who received a promise from the prophet Isaiah that the virgin would be with child. Ahaz? Part of the plan.
- The exile, those long days of suffering, of defeat, those days of despair, when so many were carried into captivity, carried beside the rivers of Babylon, where they wept. Exile, defeat, despair, things which we desperately seek to avoid, with the God who gives us Jesus Christ, those very things we dread are seen as part of God's plan.
- And an unexpected pregnancy? Part of God's plan. "Joseph", said the angel, "do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (Which means "God is with us.")

All of this took place, all of the wonder and joy that surrounds the birth of Jesus, all of this took place, all the twists and turns of many generations, the faith of Abraham and Sarah, the wrestling of Jacob, the

travails of Joseph, the triumphs of David, the failures of so many who followed David, the tender story of Ruth and her willingness to follow Naomi wherever she would go, the heartbreak of the exile and the hope that one day, one day, a Savior would come, all of this is part of the plan, and that plan was formed by God a long, long time ago. And when we say, “A long, long time ago”, we mean a long, long, time ago...in fact, a really long, long, long time ago.

As with so many plans long in the making, when the time arrives there is surprisingly a lot of last-minute hustle and bustle, and frankly, some moments of panic. A telegram arrives from Caesar Augustus. Pack up your donkey and go to Bethlehem. It is time to stand up and be counted. Over a thousand years of planning and that telegram caught everyone by surprise. What will we do? Mary is pregnant. I called all over Bethlehem and there are no hotel rooms. Where are we going to stay? The angels? They should have been all set, but when it was time for them to gather a welcoming committee for the birth of the Messiah, everyone was all tied up. They had to go way out in a field and find some shepherds to fill the role. The Wise Men? To call them *The Wise Men* might be overstating things. They showed up late to the birth. By all accounts they showed up a few weeks late. Come on, you had ten centuries to get your act together. And then when the baby is born you show up with gold, frankincense, and myrrh. No diapers? No formula? No blankets? No casserole?

Just when we start to think the day of Christ’s glorious birth caught everyone by surprise, caught them flat-footed, caught them unprepared and unawares, the Star of Bethlehem appears, shining like a beacon in the night. Even a novice astronomer like me can tell you the odds are truly astronomical that that particular star would shine at that particular time in that particular region of the country near Bethlehem, and that it all happened by chance. The light that shined when Jesus was born was a light that emanated from that distant star thousands of years before. Abraham lived 2,000 years before the Christ child. Who knows how long that light had been traveling from that distant star so that at just the right moment, it would signal the birth of the King of the Jews. Talk

about a long, long time ago. “O....O...star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright, westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.” The Star of Bethlehem was the perfect light, literally illuminating the perfect plan of God, that awesome and amazing plan of God that had been put in place a long, long time ago.

American Pie, a classic modern song written by Don McLean, has absolutely nothing to do with Christmas. But American Pie is an extremely popular song, played frequently on the radio. American Pie is played all throughout the different seasons of the year. So what comes next is meant to be a little ditty that tucks itself away in your mind, with the hope that if American Pie ever comes on your radio, it might take you back to what we have been talking about this morning, to something beautiful, something wonderful, something amazing, and something awesome that happened...a long, long time ago.

A long, long time ago, the Lord told Abraham to go, so Abraham left his country and his home

He went over to the Canaan land, where God told Abraham to stand, and uttered a promise that was great and oh so grand

I will give to your children this land, if on my promises you will stand, and you will laugh your heart out when a son is born

But that trip up Moriah made Abraham shiver until from the thicket a ram was delivered, and the promises kept on growing all the while

Isaac, Jacob, Judah and sons, forty-two generations to the chosen one, and then Mary shared with Joseph she was with child

Now Mary was meek and Mary was mild, but her story sounded very wild

Until in a dream to Joseph an angel came,

Saying this child to be born, Jesus is his name, and when he comes this world will never be the same

God has chosen with us to dwell, when the virgin delivers call him Immanuel

And he will show you that my love will never fail

Ah, the love of Jesus was deep and wide, he brought many sinners to his side

But when he was crucified, every single follower cried, every single last hope died...

What a surprise when at the tomb they looked inside, and found his graveclothes cast aside

Oh yes, he was crucified, but God raised him up and now he is glorified

One day every tear will be dried, when he comes back and takes us to his side, and in his presence we will abide for all eternity.

Alive, alive Jesus Christ is alive, only he could face death and still survive, his children all love him as they flock to his side saying in your presence we will abide, Jesus in your presence we will abide.

Or if you prefer, in the words of a Christmas Carol that was also written a long, long time ago

Joyful all ye nations rise! Join the triumph of the skies! With angelic host proclaim, Christ is born in Bethlehem.

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing, Glory to the new born King!