

If yesterday's reading from Genesis was heavy, with "he died. He died. He died," today's reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, while rooted in the wars and disasters against God's people Israel, is one of hope. And not only hope, but it is of the three "big ones" in the early chapters of Isaiah, the first, in fact. The other two specifically in the first chapters of Isaiah are Isaiah 9:2ff (from which we get "God is with us!

Understand all ye nations and submit yourselves, for God is with us!) and 11:1ff "there shall come a shoot from the stump of Jesse..."

Today's reading is the famous "ask the Lord a sign, as high as heaven..." Isaiah 7:14.

And what is the sign? "A virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and call his name Immanuel" (which means, "God with us"). While the Hebrew text (and therefore many English translations most of which are taken from the Hebrew) reads, "young woman" from the Hebrew "Almah", the Greek OT, called the Septuagint, and translated by the Jews in the 3rd Century BC (and certainly completed by the 1st Century BC), reads "Virgin"—in Greek "parthenos" (after which the pagan Greek Parthenon—temple of the virgins—was named).

Parthenos means very specifically, "woman who has never known a man".

This, the Evangelist Matthew quotes in his Nativity account.

This one of the messianic prophecies of Jesus Christ.

This flows into our churches iconographically, too. Though not yet at Holy Ascension, most every Orthodox Church painted according to tradition, features a larger-than-life image of the Virgin Theotokos with a medallion of Christ in her womb.

Whereas the ignorant and sometimes belligerent non-Orthodox Christians will point and say, "See, they worship Mary...She is the prominent one," they miss the Biblical reality of this incredible fresco.

It is named the "Virgin of the Sign" and is taken exactly from Isaiah 7:14.

So, remembering our mortality, let us not despair, remembering that God has not only made a promise—that a virgin would conceive and bear a son Immanuel, but that she indeed **has** borne the Son, who calls us to himself for life everlasting, which is inaugurated already even today.