

A Vision of Forgiveness
A sermon preached by
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First United Methodist Church of Evanston
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Matthew 1.18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' ²²All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:*
²³ *'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.'* ²⁴*When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son;* and he named him Jesus.*

One of the casualties of the digital age is the Christmas card or letter. Ten years ago, Americans sent two billion (that's with a b) cards. Today that number is 1.4 billion and most market watchers expect these numbers to continue their decline. A well-crafted Christmas letter is a thing of beauty and even though many of these now show up in my email or on my Facebook page, I still enjoy the chance to hear about the accomplishments of kids and grandkids, some of whom I have never met. Each year these letters are a short form genealogy of the comings and goings of a family.

In Matthew's story about the coming of Jesus, the author begins with a similar Christmas letter about the family of Jesus. It's just before the gospel passage that we read today and it rarely makes it into a preacher's top ten list. But a brief review of the family tree can show you that this is an average family with all the flaws that come from being human. There is Tamar, who was raped by her father-in-law who then tried to burn her alive; there is the wife of Uriah, Bathsheba, who, although she is married, lies with the aggressor King David and bears his child; there is Uzziah, who is struck down by God for his arrogance; there is Mannaseh, who restored idol worship in the face of being captured by the Assyrians; and these are the family members

that made the Christmas card cut! Just imagine the un-mentionable ones among them. This is the family that God chose to save the world and become incarnate within. As a preacher once said, “If God can save the world with this family – imagine what God can do with yours!”¹

So, Jesus’ family is filled with morally questionable characters, crazy aunts and uncles, or the kids that are haltingly wandering toward adulthood, the same kinds of kin that dot our Christmas card landscapes. And the fact that Matthew doesn’t shy away from this genealogy helps us to see the true nature of Jesus’ humanity. If God is to become incarnate in us, this means that God is willing to engage in the good, the bad, and the ugly of our lives.

In his commentary on Matthew’s birth narrative, David Lose writes that there is heartache in the story of Jesus’ birth, heartache that has been glossed over by centuries of candlelight and beloved carols that cast a rosy hue around the story. It is easy to forget that Joseph and Mary were real people, no doubt with the same apprehensions and fears that any new parents might have today or 2000 years ago.²

The story is told from Joseph’s perspective, and although we never hear him speak in the Bible, there is no missing his struggle. The Torah was very clear about what happened to women who became pregnant by someone other than their husband. So, Joseph’s intention is to dismiss her quietly, a vision of forgiveness. That would have been the best that Mary could have hoped for. If he had made the story of her pregnancy public, she could have been stoned to death. And although the details of the story are very sparse, what is clear is that it takes a visit from an angel to reorient Joseph toward God’s intentions. This of course, is a familiar pattern in the scriptures. Angels often show up when nothing else will do; they are God’s messengers of last resort. And it’s probably safe to say that the time between when Joseph learned of Mary’s pregnancy and when the angel tells him to snap out of it would not have been filled with goodness and light. Indeed, both Mary and Joseph would have most likely been in conflict, apprehensive, fearful and uncertain what the future might hold for them and the child.

And that, of course, is the point. We have – each of us – experienced similar upheavals. Indeed, who knows how many of us here today are struggling to hold it all together while at church. Families who struggle with discord, couples who feel disconnected, kids wondering what future they may have, elders wondering the same from a different point of view. Some

¹ Pulpit Fiction Podcast, 12/9/2016

² David Lose, God Really with Us, In the Meantime... blog December 2016

seek jobs, some relationships, some any sense of acceptance or worth, but the quest is a universal one and the journey to Bethlehem is a metaphor for the journeys that all of us undertake at various stages in our lives.

So, the story gives us another opportunity to hear that God works through real people with real challenges. There is no fairy-tale princess to bear the savior, but rather an unwed peasant girl. There is no instantly recognizable family name or silver spoon to feed and care for Jesus. Instead his earthly family is made up of a simple carpenter with his own doubts and questions, a man who wanted to do the right thing but needed angelic guidance to accomplish it. And a young, inexperienced woman who also responds to her own version of divine intervention.

Have you noticed that the story gives Jesus two names? First it's Jesus, then it's Emmanuel, then it's back to Jesus again. It is almost as if even the angelic representatives are having a disagreement about what to call the baby. They are arguing about what the ancient expectation holds, what the prophets had said would happen -- the reason why kids are later embarrassed about the names that they were given. "Why in the world did you give me Lynn as a middle name...don't you know that I'll spend my time on the playground hiding from the abuse?"

But Emmanuel also sticks for Jesus, a name that means God with us. Usually we hear Christians use this expression to speak of God's intimate presence, especially in difficult times (such as the death of a loved one). The element of comfort is certainly part of the meaning. But Matthew calls something more to mind by citing Isaiah.

As I said last week, Isaiah's nation faced a significant threat. However, the birth of a child demonstrated God's intent to save the nation from Assyrian domination. The name "Emmanuel" and the expression "God with us" signal both that significant social transition is about to occur and that the community can live through the anxiety of transition because they believe that God is present in the midst of it.

The birth of Jesus, similarly, signals that the end-time transformation is underway. This time it is not the Assyrians but instead the Romans who are the threatening outside forces. And the truth is that in every day and age our community -- our world -- is under threat from one foe or another. We are a people who have walked in darkness. And the child becomes the light, God with us. Often that is difficult to hear and believe, but it is the ancient story that is repeated over and again in the scriptural story, with implications for our time and place.

One commentator has written that the translation ought to read not just *God with us* but instead it should read *God REALLY with us*. That is, God coming to be with us as we are. Not as we know we should be, or are trying to be, or have promised to be, or will be some day, but with us as we are now...today...in this moment. Perhaps that's the promise at the heart of this passage – that as God came before to be with, use, accept, and hallow Joseph and Mary at the birth of Christ, so also God comes to us in Christ to be with us, use us for good, accept us as we are, and hallow us by God's own presence. Yes, God is really with us. Yes, God is with us, really and truly as we are. Yes, this is our Emmanuel.³ Amen

³ Ibid.