

GOD WITH US WITH GOD

MATTHEW 1:18-25

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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Are you ready for Christmas?

The question came from Ed, a cheerful clerk at Save-On-Foods, on Thursday evening as I was picking up some milk while Claire was at swim club.

This is one of those questions like, “What do you do for a living?”— that always makes me stop for a minute before proceeding. How best to respond...?

Among my many pastoral gifts (humility, for example) is that of subjecting harmless questions like these to tortuous and unnecessary analysis. ☺

What kind of response, I wondered, was Ed from Save-On-Foods seeking?

Was he asking if I had finished all of my Christmas shopping? If so, the answer would be, yes, mostly, meager though my efforts are. Naomi, bless her soul, knows that there are few things I hate more than shopping malls at Christmas time and graciously does most of this for us.

We don't go overboard on the presents anyway but yes, I suppose I could be said to be “ready” for this aspect of Christmas, even if I can hardly claim much merit here.

Or, perhaps Ed was asking if I was “ready” for the crush of family and friends and parties and social obligations that the season often contains. Again, my response would fall into the rather muted category.

I love my family on both sides and enjoy spending time with them. Yes, it can be busy at times, but I am certainly not one of these people who dread Christmas due to the prospect of forced time with those to whom genetics and choice has bound them. I'm ready.

Maybe Ed's "Are you ready for Christmas?" had to do with the vocational demands of the season. Admittedly, this seemed a less likely option given that Ed didn't know me or that I am a pastor.

But my thought experiment was beginning to get interesting, so I just went with it ☺.

Am I ready for the busyness of the Christmas season in the life of the church? Well, yet again, my answer would be a rather unexciting "yeah, sure."

Our church has a Christmas Eve service but nothing on Christmas Day. And our Christmas Eve service has been wonderfully planned and coordinated by people who are not me.

I have a few duties on Christmas Eve, and a New Years Day service to prepare for. But compared to some of my high church colleagues who have what seems to me an incredible number of services to prepare for at this time of the year, I certainly have nothing to complain about. I am ready for Christmas at church.

Or... *maybe* Ed was asking me a theological question. This seems the least likely option of all. I doubt Ed was pondering deep existential mysteries as he mechanically ran my milk and bananas across the scanner.

But what if Ed was wondering if I am "ready" for the coming of Christ into our world and all that this signifies? Could his question have been about the character of my longing, the shape of my hope?

Am I ready for the Christ child who came to initiate the great reversal of history—the lowly being lifted up, the proud being brought down?

Am I ready for peace on earth and goodwill to all? Am I ready for no more war, no more crazed school shootings, no more refugee crises that steal and destroy human life?

Am I ready for no more corrupt politicians and unjust economic policies, no more divisions based on things that should never divide human beings?

Am I ready for *shalom*—for swords being beaten into plowshares, for all people, from the greatest to the smallest having God’s law written on their hearts?

Am I ready for a new heaven and a new earth, for the one who is making all things new to come again in glory? Am I ready for the hopes and fears of all the years to be met, once and for all?

Oh yes. I am ready.

It turns out that Ed was mostly interested in option A—whether or not I had finished Christmas shopping. My response was pretty boring (and short) so Ed spent the rest of our time together excitedly telling me all about the various seasons of Game of Thrones that he had bought for his wife.

I forked over for my \$10.28, wished Ed a Merry Christmas, and trudged out into the frozen parking lot.

But as I shivered my way to the pool to pick up Claire, I began to rethink my answer. Am I really as ready for the hope of Christmas as I think I am?

The more I thought about it, the more I thought that in addition to my eager “yes,” I must also answer, “no”.

No, I am not ready for Christmas. I am not ready for the coming of Jesus, which exposes and judges and purifies and refines.

My heart is not prepared for this child who unsettles and upends and divides. I still cling too tightly to cherished sins, to preferred means of deriving identity and value through things that are passing away.

Too often I am not an instrument of peace. Too often, I “collude with the assumptions and behaviors of the old age,” to return to a quote I used a few weeks ago.

Too often I domesticate Christ and his coming, treating it as little more than a pleasant holiday with lights and cheer and cookies and parties, rather than the beginning of the

end of the world as we know it, the beginning of God's revolutionary project of healing, judging, forgiving, reclaiming and renewing the world.

Too often I imagine that the coming of Christmas demands too little of me.

No, at the deepest level, I am probably not ready for Christmas. Not as ready as I should be.

I am not suggesting that we have to achieve a certain moral status before we can be said to be "ready" for Jesus' coming. Not at all.

The Jesus that was born to a frightened teenager in a feed trough surrounded by the flies and the stench of livestock, the Jesus who came for the sick, not the healthy does not require—has *never* required—a carefully sanitized and "appropriate" place in which to reside. Santa might give presents only to the nice kids, but Jesus has always seemed to prefer to start with the naughty.

The issue is, I think, the nature of our wanting, the shape of our readiness. It's easy to want generic things. It's relatively easy to be ready for world peace.

It's easy to be ready for lions and lambs and children fearlessly playing with snakes and cities paved with streets of gold.

It's easy to be ready for a kind of vague and undefined goodness to magically appear from the sky, demand nothing of us, and drag us along to utopia.

It's easy to be ready for God *with* us... As long as we get to define what "with" means and as long as it doesn't require too much of us.

Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, "God is with us."

The incarnation—God taking on human flesh in Jesus—is and has been a source of enormous comfort and consolation to Christians for the past two thousand years.

A God who would enter our experience, who would take on our flesh, who would understand what it means to be human on a deep and personal level—this is good news.

But there is more to “with” than comfort and consolation.

But Jesus doesn’t enter the world simply to comfort. The incarnation is about more than a divine humanity-affirming hug.

I like how Skye Jethani puts it in his book called, appropriately, *With*:

[God’s] plan to restore his creation was not to send a list of rules and rituals to follow... nor was it the implementation of useful principles.... He did not send a genie to grant us our desires... nor did he give us a task to accomplish...

Instead, God himself came to be with us—to walk with us once again as he had done in Eden in the beginning. Jesus entered into our dark existence to share our broken world and to *illuminate a different way forward*. **His coming was a sudden and glorious catastrophe of good.**¹

What a phrase. A glorious *catastrophe* of good.

Why “catastrophe?” We usually think of a catastrophe as something terrible like an earthquake or an accident or some sudden and dramatic tragedy.

But the origins of the Greek word simply mean “overturning.”

When God comes to be with us, things don’t always look like we imagine it ought to. There are some things that need to be overturned, some patterns that have to be changed...

“God with us” is all about leading to “us with God.” And this doesn’t always happen how we think it should.

We see this in the lives of Mary and Joseph.

At this time of year, we often gaze at the idyllic manger scenes with peaceful Mary and the baby Jesus that conjure up emotions of hope and promise and contentment.

¹ Skye Jethani, *With: Reimagining the Way You Relate to God* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2011).

“God with us” was good news, certainly,

But “with” also meant a young couple running for their lives as refugees not long after this baby boy of promise was born.

For Mary, “with” meant, as Simeon predicted, that a sword would pierce her soul—the baby boy who was Emmanuel would one day make her weep as he hung on a Roman cross.

And Joseph? For him, God “with” us would look like a parental relationship that began in scandal, an adopted baby boy who would probably always be a bit of an enigma to him

I can only imagine what Mary and Joseph thought as Jesus was declaring that a true disciple of his must hate their father and mother (Luke 14:26). Or when Jesus said,

“Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” And pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matthew 12:47-50).

And of course, Mary and Joseph’s people—the people of Israel—would have preferred “God with us” to look a little more victorious and triumphant than the way Jesus’ story ultimately unfolded.

Nobody imagined that “with” would involve a cruel and humiliating execution. Or a glorious and death-defeating resurrection! God with us really *would* be destined for the rising and falling of many in Israel, as Simeon predicted.

For these reasons and countless others, the son that Mary and Joseph were to give the name “Emmanuel” would indeed be the fulfillment of the hopes and fears of all the years, but not in the way they or anyone else expected.

So, on this last Sunday of Advent 2016, as we prepare to head out into the Christmas season, I want to encourage us to reconsider what “with” looks like.

Is it more (or less) than this season often tempts us to imagine that it is?

Does “with” mean comfort? Rebuke? Guidance? Deliverance? Encouragement? Hope? Abiding joy and depth of purpose?

Might “with” look like a hard road ahead, one that will test you and force you to grow and change reexamine priorities?

Could “with” mean the possibility of confusion and uncertainty (as it almost certainly did for Mary and Joseph)?

Is it possible that “with” will look like shared suffering?

And I want you to think about the ways that God *has* been and *is* with you now.

In good times and in bad times. In joyful times and times of sorrow. In times of comfort and times of difficulty. In times of faith and in moments of doubt. In ways when love seemed the most natural thing in the world and in times when you were stretched beyond what you thought possible, compelled to strange places and uncomfortable circumstances by the love of Christ.

I want to encourage you to think about the ways in which God has been saying to you what he said to both Mary and Joseph in dreams and visions: *Do not be afraid...*

I want you to consider how God is inviting you into a deeper experience of his presence, and shaping you according to his character and purposes in the world, even if in completely unexpected and unimaginable ways.

This is, after all how God works in the world, and *why* God works in the world.

If there’s one thing that Christmas reveals to us it’s that God’s coming cannot be managed, that God’s coming is not what many of us would have predicted, but that God is always *with* us in the manner most appropriate to our need.

The question the coming of Christmas invites us into: will we be *with* the God who comes to be *with* us.

Will we remain *with* God on every stage of our journey, whatever it contains, just like Mary and Joseph.

God doesn't wave a wand at Christmas and magically bring about lions and lambs and all the other magnificent visions of the prophets.

God works slowly, patiently, long-sufferingly, collaboratively. He enters our experience and involves us in the process, inviting us to be with him and he is with us.

And to be with God means to become like God. Which takes time. The character of Christ is not formed in us overnight (if only!).

It takes a lot of God with us with God.

And so, I want to end with the question I began with, the question Ed-from-Save-On-Foods asked me.

Are you ready for Christmas?

We answer, as always, with our lives.

We declare our readiness for "God with Us" by our willingness to be "with God," to allow our lives to be overturned and upended by Christmas's "glorious catastrophe of good."

Amen.

