

Emmanuel, God is With Us

Matthew 1:18-25; Romans 1:1-7

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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It's interesting to pay attention to how the gospels tell the story of Jesus. Our bibles have four gospels, of course, each reflecting Jesus through their own unique lens.

Of the four gospels, only two—Matthew and Luke—narrate the story of Jesus' birth.

Mark is so excited to get to Jesus' kingdom announcement, that he skips over Jesus' birth and childhood entirely and begins with John the Baptist and Jesus in the Jordan.

John begins in the deep end of the theological pool. *In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...* But he is silent about the actual historical events of Christmas.

Luke goes into the greatest detail about Jesus' birth and spends a lot of time on the angelic visitations and stories of Mary and Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist.

It is Matthew who invites us to consider the story from Joseph's perspective.

I think a lot about Joseph at Christmastime.

Mary gets most of the headlines, and for good reason.

She sings the song of the season, the Magnificat—*my soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour... the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name...*

Mary gives voice to the hope of a world turned right-side up, where wrongs are righted, where injustice is undone, where promises are, finally, kept.

She is the object of devotion, admiration, even reverence around the world.

We sigh as we listen to songs wondering if she knew what her baby boy would become for the world. We hail her, full of grace. Some call her the mother of God.

Nobody would call Joseph the “father of God.” That would be blasphemy!

Joseph doesn't hang around very long in the gospel narratives. He receives three angelic visitations according to Matthew, one telling him to take Mary as his wife, one telling him to flee Herod's madness, and the third telling him it's safe to return.

In each case, Joseph responds wordlessly. He did what the angel of the Lord commanded him.

He scandalously, obediently takes Mary to be his wife, even though the child she carries is not his...

He got up, took the child and his mother and left for Egypt...

He got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.

Not a single word from Joseph's mouth is recorded in the gospels.

He takes his place in our nativity scenes, silent and compliant. We don't hear much about him once we're done with the Christmas story.

Joseph disappears.

He's referred to a few more times, to be sure. He is summoned to validate people's rejection of Jesus in Nazareth. *Is not this the carpenter's son? How could anything good come out of such unimpressive stock?*

And Luke mentions him at the commencement of Jesus' public ministry:

Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry. He was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph...

Joseph is a kind of strange hiccup before business as usual is restored in tracing the genealogy of Jesus all the way back to Adam.

He was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph...

I suppose even Luke couldn't bring himself to think of Joseph as Jesus' real father.

Joseph has a place in the story, but it's on the periphery. Joseph did what the angel commanded... He got up... He fled... He returned...

He kept his mouth shut, did what he was told...

When my kids were younger, I used to love to tell them that Jesus was an adopted kid. Imagine—the Saviour of the world, the second person of the Trinity, the one in whom we live and move and have our being, the Cosmic Christ, an adopted kid!

A pretty incredible thing to contemplate.

My kids would smile when I told them this, but I don't know if it made much of an impression on them. Kids smile to humour their dads for all kinds of reasons.

I still think about Jesus as an adopted kid every year at Christmastime. And I think about Joseph as an adoptive father.

I wonder what lies behind the silence of the gospel narratives.

I wonder what Joseph thought about his son. I wonder if he was bewildered, frustrated, angry, heartbroken, desperately proud, sick with worry. Maybe all of the above and more.

I wonder if Joseph always referred to Jesus as "Mary's son." I wonder if Joseph treated Jesus differently than his "real kids."

I wonder if he ever got annoyed at people who made that distinction.

I wonder how Joseph loved this strange son of his. I wonder if it was hard for him. I wonder if he resented being silent, compliant, part of the Christmas furniture.

I guess that's the thing about silence—you can interpret it in all kinds of ways.

But each Christmas, I find myself wishing that the gospels gave us more to go on than, *He did what the angel commanded him, he got up, he fled, he returned...*

He was Jesus' father, or so it was thought.

No words from Joseph's mouth are recorded from our gospels, but our text this morning makes it clear that Joseph, like Mary, played a crucial role in the Christmas story of God coming to be with us people.

Joseph was faced with a choice that he would have never wanted.

Mary and Joseph are engaged to be married (in first century Jewish culture this would have been at least a one-year period), when Mary is discovered to be pregnant.

Conventional wisdom at this point in this culture would have been rather simple.

Divorce.

Mary had obviously been unfaithful. The wedding would obviously be called off. Joseph owed her nothing.

Mary's fate, if the letter of the law about adultery were to be observed, would be even more tenuous.

But even *before* Joseph learns the truth about Mary's pregnancy, he resolves to take an unconventional path.

Verse 19 says that Joseph was a righteous man and decided to divorce her quietly to spare her the public scorn and disgrace that were undoubtedly coming her way, as an unwed, pregnant Jewish teenage girl.

After Joseph resolves to pursue this course, the angel appears, telling him not to be afraid, to take Mary as his wife, for the child is from the Holy Spirit.

The angel tells Joseph to name him "Jesus" (Hebrew *Yeshua* or "Joshua," which means "Yahweh saves").

Matthew links this to the prophecy from Isaiah: the virgin shall conceive a son and call him Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us.'

God with us. The hope of Christmas.

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.

Jesus doesn't enter the world simply to comfort. The incarnation is about more than a divine humanity-affirming hug. Joseph knew this very well.

“God with us,” for Joseph, meant being thrust into the middle of a scandal. It meant spending the rest of his days being known as, “Jesus father, or so it was thought...”

Debie Thomas, who I quote with some regularity (her weekly essays on the lectionary readings are so good) puts it like this:

In choosing Joseph to be Jesus's earthly father, God led a “righteous” man with an impeccable reputation straight into doubt, shame, scandal, and controversy. God's call required Joseph to reorder everything he thought he knew about fairness, justice, goodness, and purity. It required him to become the talk of the town — and not in a good way. It required him to embrace a mess he had not created. To love a woman whose story he didn't understand, to protect a baby he didn't father, to accept an heir who was not his son.

In other words, God's messy plan of salvation required Joseph—a quiet, cautious, status quo kind of guy—to choose precisely what he feared and dreaded most. The fraught, the complicated, the suspicious, and the inexplicable. So much for living a well-ordered life.¹

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2484>

When God comes to be with us, things don't always look like we imagine it ought to.

"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 in idyllic manger scenes with peaceful Mary and the baby Jesus that conjure up emotions of hope and promise and contentment.

"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" would mean that, as Simeon predicted, 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 both Mary and Joseph thought as Jesus was declaring that a true disciple of his must hate their father and mother (Luke 14:26).

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.

But...

Nobody also imagined that "with" would lead to a glorious and death-defeating resurrection, as Paul reminds us in our reading from Romans this morning.

Perhaps that reading seemed strange to you. One long run-on sentence at the beginning of Paul's letter to the Romans on the Sunday before Christmas? What's that all about?

I think that on this last Sunday before Christmas, our text from Romans reminds us that as glorious and hopeful as Christmas is, is not enough. At least not on its own.

In introducing himself to the church in Rome, Paul begins, as he often does, by outlining his credentials. I was “called to be an apostle,” he says, “set apart for the gospel of God.

And what is the gospel of God?

That Jesus, “who was descended from David according to the flesh” (Christmas) was also “declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by *resurrection from the dead*, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

The little boy of questionable parentage that entered the world in the humblest of circumstances would be revealed as the Lord of all Creation by virtue of the resurrection.

As Christians, we always have one eye on Easter.

Incarnation and resurrection go together; they cannot be separated.

The incarnation is God’s ultimate stamp of approval upon the value humanity; it is God showing up as one of us, showing us what a truly human life looks like.

The resurrection is God’s vindication of all that Jesus did, taught, promised, all that Jesus *was* and *is* for the salvation of the world.

Incarnation and resurrection.

The two names of Jesus from Matthew 1.

“Emmanuel”—God *with* us; “Jesus,” “Yeshua”—God saves.

God with us, to save us—from our sin, from the power of evil and death, from all that threatens and overwhelms and terrifies us.

On this last Sunday of Advent 2019, as we prepare to head out into the Christmas season, I want to encourage us to consider what “with” looks like.

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

Does “with” mean comfort? Yes, certainly, for we are always in need of comfort.

But could “God with us” also mean rebuke? Guidance? Deliverance? Encouragement? Abiding joy and depth of purpose? Hope, for this life and the next?

Is it possible that “with” might look like a hard road ahead, one that will test you and force you to grow and change re-examine priorities?

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

Maybe “with” will look like shared suffering?

And I also 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 times 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 ways.

This is, after all, how God works in the world. And this is, after all, why God works in the world.

In the end, the question the coming of Christmas invites us to consider is a simple one: will we be *with* the God who comes to be *with* us, to save 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 ordinary everyday 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.

It takes a lot of God journeying with us and us journeying with God.

Are you ready for Christmas?

We answer, as always, with our lives.

May our answer mirror Joseph's.

He got up. He stepped into the mess and confusion with faith and hope. He did what God commanded.

He took his place in the unfolding, mysterious, liberating story of God at work in the world.

Amen.

