

## Emmanuel, God With Us

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, the last Sunday before Christmas, we have finally arrived at the story we have been waiting for, preparing for. The story of the birth of Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us. On the first Sunday of Advent we sang O Come, O Come, Emmanuel; and each Sunday we've gathered for worship to the gentle notes of Come, Come, Emmanuel. And today we hear the story of Emmanuel's coming, with the opening words of the story, "Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way."

The first thing to notice is that Matthew tells his story in such an understated way. This is not the pageant story: there's no decree from the Emperor and no census; no donkey ride to Bethlehem; no inn keeper and no stable; no shepherds in the fields overawed by an angel chorus. No angel visiting Mary, and Mary saying yes, and Mary's song of joy that we heard last week.

Instead, Matthew tells a story that focuses on the fulfillment of prophecy, and on Mary's fiancé, Joseph. You heard in the pairing of today's stories that Kari read, first the prophecy from Isaiah—"the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel—

and then Matthew's statement—"All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet"—with the slight modification, "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means God is with us."

Each of the gospel writers in their own way tells a story of God's promises from of old, and how those promises are fulfilled in Jesus. They each tell a story of God's faithfulness to humanity throughout all of humanity's bumpy history. No matter what people do; no matter how well they behave or how poorly they behave; no matter how closely our lives are aligned with God's purposes or how far we have strayed: no matter what, God remains faithful to his purposes, and faithful to us. God remains committed to fulfilling his purposes through us, even though our bumpy history might suggest that that is not such a wise plan.

Scripture records the relentless creativity of God, as God continues to devise new ways to pull us out of the ruts we get ourselves into, and up onto the road, the path on which God wants to lead us. One of God's creative initiatives is the calling of prophets, like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and others. As they respond to God's call,

their lives are turned upside down, and they are asked to do things that make them look like fools in the eyes of their friends, family, and neighbors.

Often these foolish things take the form of prophetic sign-acts, actions or prophecies that are meant to reveal something of what God is up to in the world. They are meant to call humanity's attention away from all that we usually distract ourselves with, and towards God's purposes for us and for the world.

Ezekiel is called to all kinds of strange actions, like lying on his side for days, to warn people about their impending exile. Jeremiah is commanded to purchase a property in Jerusalem, even though the city is under siege and he is in prison, as a sign that the people will have a future in that place.

And in today's passage from Isaiah, the birth of a child is given as a sign that the people will be delivered from their enemies; it is meant to draw the leaders' attention away from their preoccupation with worry and fear, and to instill in them trust in God. It is meant to encourage them.

This particular sign—the birth of a child whose name means “God is with us”—is a particularly powerful sign of promise. And while historically it is offered as a sign to King Ahaz of Judah 700 and more years before the birth of Jesus, you can see why the early Christians took it to also be a story of prophecy about Jesus. It's part of this ongoing pattern of God showing up,

again and again, to offer hope, and rescue, to people who have lost their way.

In the gospel story, Joseph is the one to whom God's sign is revealed. An angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream to say, “Do not be afraid.” Don't be afraid, Joseph, to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. Don't be afraid, Joseph, because God is in this; God is with you in this.

“Do not be afraid; I am with you,” is a constant refrain that spans the entire breadth of Scripture, from Genesis through to Revelation. God speaks these words to women and men across the eons, as part of this pattern of God showing up, again and again, to offer hope and encouragement, to offer a way forward in difficult or desperate circumstances.

Do not be afraid, Joseph. What is it that Joseph has to fear in this situation? Well, mostly it's to do with his reputation: the woman he is engaged to is pregnant, and he is not the father. And that is no small thing in their culture. Mary could have been put to death for adultery if Joseph went along with the patriarchal norms of their time and place. Marrying her despite not being the father of her child would have meant almost unendurable shaming and social rejection for Joseph. His whole identity as a man and as a member of the community is at risk. So Joseph plans to dismiss Mary quietly. That is to say, he will not publicly accuse her of adultery, sparing her the death sentence. But dismissing her

means casting her off in a world in which women and children were entirely dependent on the men in their lives.

It would have saved Joseph's reputation and his social prospects, but it would have destroyed Mary's, and her child's, reputation and prospects. They would be shunned and shamed, without protection. Their future would be very bleak indeed.

So God needs to intervene on behalf of this vulnerable woman and her unborn child, by changing the heart of a man. God intervenes to save the vulnerable by causing a man to step out of his social conditioning, to go against powerful social norms, and to realign his life in the service of God's purposes, in the service of love.

How easy it would have been for Joseph to do otherwise—to go along with what was normal for a man in his circumstances. All of his friends, all of his family, likely would have been encouraging him to stand up for what was right, to stand up for his rights as a wronged fiancé. The kinder, more compassionate amongst them might have encouraged his plan to dismiss Mary quietly. Joseph needed to hear those words, 'Don't be afraid; I am with you,' to be encouraged to take the risk to change.

To be able to stand up, perhaps every day, to those who questioned his choice to stand by Mary, to those who questioned his manhood, to those who questioned his sanity. Joseph needed to hear those words so that he could take

the risk and stand up for love. All this to facilitate the greatest of God's signs in history, the birth of Jesus the Messiah, the one who comes to save us from every form of trouble we get into.

It is so startlingly understated, so contingent, such a risky strategy.

Yet this is how God works much of the time: through ordinary people and everyday circumstances, yet depending on us to do extraordinary things. Not extraordinary as in super-human; extraordinary as in being willing to go against our cultural conditioning, being willing to resist the reassuring counsel of our friends, who advise us to do what everyone else is doing, to do our part for the team, or the group. The voices that encourage us to do what is expected of us by our society, or by our gender, or by our political party, or by our family, even when those are not aligned with God's purposes.

The sign of this child, this embodiment of the message, "Do not be afraid; I am with you," is God's most enduring sign to all of us. It is meant to encourage all of us, to act in the service of love, and to do so even when that seems like a risky, or even crazy, thing to do.

We revisit this story every year at Christmas to rekindle our courage; to try again; to climb once more out of the ruts we've found ourselves in; and to get back on God's path.

The story of Joseph, and his willingness to have his life upended in the service of love; to risk mockery and

the disapproval of his mates as the cost of standing up for the vulnerable and unprotected; to put his whole life in the service of what God is trying to do in the world—this story is another invitation to us.

For just as surely as the angelic messenger came to Joseph, does it come to us: to us ordinary people in everyday circumstances, living in a world that so much of the time does not live up to what God intended: fullness of life for everyone.

“Do not be afraid; I am with you,” God says to each of us, stoking our courage, fueling our resistance to just taking the easy, socially-approved way, and instead taking the risk to show the world another way.

“Do not be afraid; I am with you.” Words of reassurance, and an invitation to courageous, countercultural, response. This Christmas, I pray that you hear these words, and I pray that you find the courage to respond, in whatever ordinary circumstances you find yourself, whatever everyday wrongs you may be called to make right. In the name of Emmanuel, God-with-us. Amen.

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