

SCRIPTURE:

Isaiah 7:10-16: ¹⁰Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. ¹²But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. ¹³Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. ¹⁵He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

Matthew 1:18-25: ¹⁸Now 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 fulfill 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." ²⁴When 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.

SERMON for the Fourth Sunday of Advent: "He came to dwell among us" The Rev. Dr. Richard Floyd

When I retired from active ministry in 2004, I recall thinking, "I'll never preach an Easter or a Christmas sermon ever again." And I wondered about Advent, which is my favorite season of the church year. Would I ever preach another Advent sermon? Turns out this year I'm preaching two. The first Sunday of Advent was really early. We'd hardly digested our Thanksgiving turkey when the first Sunday of Advent came along. Some of you know my daughter is a pastor in Rhode Island. We were going to be around anyway, so she said hey dad, could you preach for me and give me a Sunday off? So I preached on the first Sunday of Advent, and here I am on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, because Brent asked me to preach. So I bookended this holy season, which makes me glad, because I love Advent.

It makes me glad because it's a season full of meaning. It is a heavy, portentous time of waiting and watching, longing and hoping. Think of the Advent hymns: "O Come, O Come Emmanuel"; "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus"; "Watchman, Tell Us of the Night"; "Lo, He Comes with Clouds Descending." There is a sense of yearning in Advent. A sense of anticipation. A time to be alert and alive to what God might be doing around us and within us. A time to remind ourselves that there are forces at work beyond our control.

And then we come today to hear the angel's familiar words to Joseph, words that directly echo the prophecy from Isaiah 7:14.

So, my focus today is twofold: First, I want to reflect on the role of Joseph in the Christmas story and what his role tells us about the way God works with us and among us.

Second, and very much related, is to explore the meaning of the angel's message, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." What does it mean to say that "God is with us."

So, let us begin with Joseph. In Luke's gospel it is Mary who is front and center in the story of the nativity of Jesus, and in our minds, I think that is where she stays. But here in Matthew we get more of a glimpse of Joseph.

Joseph is not a very substantial character in the pages of scripture. What do we know about him? He is introduced in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus as the "husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah."

We see him in today's story about Jesus' birth, and again briefly in the events of Jesus' childhood, the circumcision at the temple, the flight to Egypt to escape Herod, and in a small story about Jesus as a twelve-year old when he gets separated from his parents on a trip to Jerusalem and turns up at the Temple, teaching the elders. Then Joseph disappears from the story, except for references to Jesus as the carpenter's son.

But though Joseph seems to be what we might call a supporting character, without him the drama of salvation could not have taken place. And I would submit that that is just the way God works, with supporting characters who appear for a little bit and do what needs to be done and then disappear from the story. But they are always a part of the story, and the story wouldn't be complete without them.

And it seems safe to say that without Joseph, Jesus could never have become who he became. Joseph must have played an important forming and nurturing part in the life of Jesus. There has been much speculation about Jesus' upbringing in the carpenter shop in Nazareth.

Joseph's description as a "tekton" (τέκτων) has been traditionally translated into English as "carpenter." You know I love to play around with the Greek and Hebrew words, so here goes. Bear with me. It is a rather general word (from the same root that gives us "technique," "technical" and "technology." The Greek word evokes an artisan with wood in general, or an artisan in iron or stone. But the specific association with woodworking is a constant in Early Christian tradition; Justin Martyr (who died around 165) wrote that Jesus was a carpenter that made yokes and ploughs, and perhaps coffins.

In truth, we just don't know, because the scriptures don't tell us, but if Joseph lived until Jesus was at least twelve, as Matthew indicates, then Joseph becomes the primary male role model for the young Jesus.

I need to say a little about Matthew the evangelist, who wrote this gospel. We talked about this in our Bible study. Who was Matthew? Matthew was a Jewish Christian, writing to a congregation of Jewish Christians. In the early years of the first century, Christianity was a completely Jewish sect. But over time, as you read in the Book of Acts and in Paul's writings, it becomes more Gentile, and then becomes almost all Gentile. So Matthew and his followers were kicked out of the synagogue for being Jesus followers. Matthew always wants to remind his readers that the God of this new story about Jesus is the same God as the God of Israel, not a different god. So he is always quoting direct prophecies, or suggesting parallels to the Hebrew Bible. So, Matthew quotes directly from Isaiah 7:14.

And here's another echo from the Old Testament I never particularly noticed before: the infant Jesus, like the infant Moses, is in peril from a cruel king (Herod and Pharaoh, respectively). And like Moses, Jesus has a (fore)father named Joseph who goes down to Egypt, and like the Old Testament Joseph, this Joseph has a father named Jacob. Finally, both Josephs receive important dreams foretelling their future. Cool parallels. As my Old Testament professor, Phyllis Trible, liked to say, "Scripture casts long shadows."

One noted scholar speculates that Mary and Joseph were from the ranks of the humble and pious multitudes, the kind of people who loved God and maintained the law as best they could, but without the means to carry it out to the letter in all its intricacy. If this is true, it would go far in explaining Jesus' antipathy to the strict law-keeping of the Pharisees.

In any case, in the story of Jesus' birth Joseph is most remarkable in the way he responded to this crisis in his life. The young woman to whom he is betrothed is found to be pregnant. The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible says "engaged," but betrothal was more than engaged. It had the weight of marriage. And this young woman to whom he was betrothed was found to be pregnant. This is more than a matter of divorce: the law demands her life by stoning for adultery. So, Joseph dismissing her quietly (or as the King James version says, privily) is an act of great personal integrity. It tells us something about this man Joseph. He's not turning her over to the authorities to be punished. And what is even more remarkable is that when he has this strange dream, in which an angel of the Lord appears to him and tells him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit, he believes the angel and does what the angel said to do.

The angel said something else about this child: they are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins, and that all this fulfills what Isaiah had written: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and he shall be called Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

Let me invite you to consider this Christmas the statement that "God is with us." Consider that God is with us not just in high moments of religious insight, in worship and in prayer, or some mystical moment when all seems clear, but rather in the ordinary events that befall us in our daily life.

One of the implications of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is that God is no longer remote, high in the heavens, but is "with us" in daily life, and that our personal story is inextricably wrapped up in God's larger story. There is more to it than that to be sure; there is a cross as well as a cradle, and we need Easter to interpret Christmas, and perhaps Pentecost to interpret them both, for without the Holy Spirit (God present with us) it all becomes just a story from long ago that can touch our hearts, but not change our lives.

But God is with us now, because of Jesus Christ. There's a wonderful line in an Amy Grant song that says "the child who was born in Bethlehem is still among us now." Jesus has been described as the human face of God. We can see his face and know that there is something of him in the other human faces we see. God is with us in our exalted moments of joy, when we get glimpses of the joy God intends for us. Perhaps a sunset does it for you, or a fresh snowfall. Moments of unadulterated joy and happiness.

That God is with us and for us and not against us is surely the best of Good News. There is a wonderful Hebrew word and concept in the Old Testament, *hesed* (or better *chesed*.) It is translated in the King James Bible and the RSV and the NRSV as "steadfast love." You see that a lot in the Bible, right? God's steadfast love. The New International Version translates it as "loyal love." In the grand sweep of the Biblical story *hesed* is God staying faithful to his people even when humans are not faithful to him. It's a story of unrequited love. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann translates *hesed* as "God's tenacious solidarity with humankind." God does not give up on us.

So it is, that our own personal stories may only be understood in the light of this vaster story that begins at the moment of creation and will end in glory in God's own good time, and finds its center around two poor Palestinian peasants wondering what the birth of this child might mean. That the angel promised that the child means "God is with us" must have addressed their perplexity, as it can address ours.

For it means God is with us not just in those fleeting moments of joy, but in moments of confusion and despair, of faithlessness and doubt, the kind that comes to all of us at one time or another. The God of Good Friday who is also the God of Christmas is with us.

So “God with us” is not the stuff of commercial sentimentality; it means God really with us in all the grandeur and misery of human life, in war-torn Ukraine and Ethiopia, in Yemen and Iran, and in the homeless mean streets of our cities, as well as by the Christmas tree in the warmth of our living room.

When tragedy strikes, a heartbreaking school shooting or a monstrous war, we tend to ask, “Where is God?” The mystery of the Incarnation puts God right in the thick of it all.

“Where is God?” God is here! God with us. When hearts break and tears flow, the first heart to break is God’s, the first tears to flow are God’s.

For God does not stay remote, high above the heavens, but ventured into the precarious life of an infant born into a marginal family in a precarious political situation. This whole story takes place in occupied Roman territory. That should give us pause from turning the Christian religion into something ethereal and apart from real life.

As I’ve shared with you in the past, I’ve had my own struggles with disability and mental illness, and after decades of ministry I rediscovered that God’s presence was as much with me in the darkness and struggle as when I was listening to Handel’s *Messiah*.

This is the world that God in Christ comes to, to the dark as well as to the light, to the weeping as well as to the rejoicing. There are many among us, perhaps you are one of them, who don’t feel that this is “the most wonderful time of the year.” Perhaps you have lost someone you love.

When I was an active pastor, many people told me how hard the holidays were for them. Some stayed away from church because it made them too sad. It is hard to “be of good cheer” when life seems devoid of meaning and purpose; when darkness has overtaken your life.

But it is exactly at such times that one most needs the church, most needs the community of faith, most needs prayer, most needs God.

This Christmas I invite you to discover God in the everyday ebb and flow of your life, in the ones you love as well as the ones who drive you up a wall, in your moments of consternation as well as in your high moments of joy.

Take the time this Christmas to take it all in. If you spend all your time in frenzied preparation, you may just not be paying attention, and miss the time of your visitation, and never learn, as Joseph did, what important supporting role you are called to play in this great big story of which our story is valued as an important part by the God who, whatever else he may be, is most assuredly with us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.