

## ***“God With US?”***

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*Matthew 1:18-25*

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As we read this account of the birth of Jesus, the person we can't help but feel sorry for is Joseph. We learn that Joseph and Mary are engaged. They are going to get married. This is not like an engagement in our culture. At that time the way a couple was typically engaged was that the parents of the couple would arrange the marriage, probably when the children are young. Then about the time the girl was becoming a teenager, she would be "betrothed" to her future husband. This began a year-long courtship between the couple. They lived apart and did not engage in marital relationships but they were considered bound together. The only way to end the relationship at this point was by divorce.

So you can imagine the shock and disappointment when Joseph learns that his soon-to-be wife is pregnant, and it's not his baby. All his hopes and dreams have been crushed. How could she have done this? How could they go through with the marriage now? In every way – moral, emotional, and legal – Joseph was right to plan to end the betrothal.

The Scripture tells us that Joseph was a just man. He wanted no part of a corrupt marriage. But the penalty for adultery in those days was death. To expose Mary meant that she would likely be stoned to death. So Matthew also tells us that he was "unwilling to put her to shame." He planned to divorce her quietly, with the minimum number of witnesses, usually two.

At this point in the story, Matthew has told us what Joseph doesn't know yet. This baby is not the result of adultery. This baby is the work of the Holy Spirit in Mary's body. What's fascinating is the way that the

Lord let Joseph struggle with this issue for a while before revealing a better plan. How often does God do the same thing with us? He allows us to struggle with our circumstances, to carry the emotional burden, before He reveals a better way. But when He does reveal His plan, we must change our plans. "We must test our plans and purposes against God's will, as revealed in Scripture" and in the counsel of trustworthy fellow believers.

So God reveals to Joseph a better plan through an Angel. These days we have a very distorted view of angels. As one author put it, In the Bible, angels are NOT cute, and they do NOT specialize in romance. Angels are God's mighty messengers." In fact, often times the first thing an angel will say to someone is "do not be afraid." An appearance of an angel, as a messenger of God, is almost certainly a fear-producing event.

The angel says to Joseph, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." The name Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua, which means, "the LORD will save."

What Joseph learns is that this child is the work of God. We don't know whether Joseph understood that the baby would be the long-awaited Messiah, but because he is descended from king David, Joseph will have an important role to play in the life of this baby. He is going to adopt Jesus into the legal lineage of king David.

Matthew then tells us that the miraculous virgin conception took place to

fulfill what Isaiah the prophet had said hundreds of years before: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name “Immanuel” (which means, God with us).

God with us. I don’t think we even begin to understand fully what that means, but this evening I want us to consider it for a few minutes. GOD with us. In the birth of Jesus, the immeasurable God who created the universe, scattered the stars across billions of miles, who created protons and neutrons and upquarks and downquarks, who arranged every detail of our planet so that it could not only sustain life but so that it could flourish, the God who numbers the very hairs on your head, that very God has entered into the human condition. He has become one of us. GOD is with us.

My friend Larry Coulter, a pastor up in Austin, often says that there are three questions that everyone eventually has to answer for themselves. First, “is there a God?” Most people in our country would answer that question yes. The view of the atheist, that everything that exists came about by random chance, really is an intellectually weak argument. There is a growing trend even among non-religious scientists that life is just way too complex to be explained by natural forces. 4.6 billion years is just not enough time to develop the complexity we find in nature. To believe that there is no God requires more faith than to believe that there is a God.

The next question, however, is a little trickier. If there is a God, is this God knowable? Is there any way to know what He’s like? More importantly, can we know Him personally? For us as Christians, the answer is a resounding YES. That’s the story of Christmas. We are celebrating the fact that God loves us so much that He came to live among His people as one of us in this

man named Jesus of Nazareth. That’s the meaning of Emmanuel – God is now with US!

But there are two aspects to Emmanuel, God with us. First, With the birth of Christ, God is now with us in *person*. He has come to save His people from their sins. He has come to save US from OUR sins. He has come to be present with you all the time. Tonight or tomorrow when we gather together with family and friends and eat and celebrate and open gifts, God is with us. And when we find ourselves alone, hurting, hitting rock bottom, God is with us then, too. We are never alone. God is always present, always with us, either to bless or to curse.

Larry’s third question is the most personal: “Does it matter?” Today, sadly, many people don’t want a savior. All of us are guilty of trying to work out our own deliverance, our own salvation. And for a while it seems to be effective. It looks like things are going pretty well. But when trouble comes we find that we are unable to save ourselves. We look for salvation in all the wrong places. Some drown their troubles with alcohol and drugs, or work, or money, or in family, or friends or school. While those may seem to work for a while, none of them “can match the eternal, gracious deliverance God offers.” None of those things can provide for you what only Jesus offers. Immanuel means God is with you, whether you like it or not. As one pastor wrote, “Immanuel is not a religious option for those who choose to embrace it. Immanuel is the *truth*, whether you choose to embrace it or not!” But if you believe, God is with you to bless and to save. His deliverance is the only one that works in the end.

At the end of this passage, Matthew tells us that when Joseph woke, “he did as the

angel of the Lord commanded him.”  
Perhaps here Joseph is the best example  
from the Christmas story for each of us. He  
refused to be led by shame or anger and  
instead listened to God and obeyed. He  
chose the more difficult way because in the  
end it was the only way. Like Joseph,  
tonight we recognize that the appropriate

response to Immanuel, God with us, is faith,  
trust, love, and obedience. And when we  
respond we received the blessings of  
Immanuel. Tonight may you truly believe  
and experience the presence of Christ, the  
reality of God with us.

*Amen*