

Matthew 1:18-25
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“Emmanuel”

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Last Sunday we held our annual children’s Christmas program. It was fantastic. Afterward I said to someone, “you know... this is probably more reflective of the way the first Christmas actually went than all of our perfectly molded Christmas eve services.” The first Christmas was more of a Christ-mess. And likewise the world we live in is as messy, or moreso.

This year we hear the Christmas story from the gospel of Matthew. I am not a big fan of Matthew’s version -- its dry --just 7 verses long. The main characters don’t speak; we only hear from an Angel and a narrator.

Yet in these few verses we get a clear picture that the first Christmas was messy. No one was sure what to do? No one was sure where they should go? All were confused and lonely as they tried to navigate this miracle. We imagine the paralyzing fear which resided in Mary’s young teenage heart? We recognize the disastrous quandary Joseph is in! Both of them had every reason to turn away from God, follow conventional wisdom that Joseph should dismiss Mary, and accept the loneliness which comes with such an unpleasant situation.

It was a mess. That is why each year The Children’s Christmas program is so close to my heart. Unlike a perfect Performance of Handel’s Messiah the annual children’s Christmas program is the very moment when we draw closest to experiencing the real, first, messy Christmas. A Christmas then, as now, which needs the help of teachers and moms and narrators and even angels to move it along.

See, each year many of us rake ourselves over the coals to make our decorations, our gatherings of family and friends, our worship services and everything else about Christmas look like the picture perfect front of a holiday greeting card. We want the food at the perfect temperature, the family squabbles set aside, the stress and tension absent. Christmas Eve at church we want the lights turned down at the perfect moment when Silent Night begins, and raised up at the perfect moment when the first note of Joy to the world sounds. But the first Christmas happened in fear and hesitation and messiness. The first Christmas happened as everyone was trying to figure out what posture to adopt in relation to this newborn king.

Advent helps us reshape and renew our distorted and mangled relationships with God and with each other. Each year we hear the annual themes. “Keep watch,” -- “Stay awake” -- “Prepare the way of the lord.” These themes place us back in correct relationship with God in Jesus Christ.

This fear-filled, imperfect, messy world takes it’s toll on our lives. Each year new personal grievances crop up. New hurts scar us. The grief of passed loved ones grips us. Disappointments tear at our joy. Our spiritual work during advent is to trust again, believe again, dream again of how mighty and wonderful God’s goodness can be... it is the promise that

in the face of hesitation, fear, sorrow, and doubt; Jesus is Emmanuel, God-with-us. And in the middle of our messy, fear-filled, confused lives we can encounter the God who is born to be with us. God with us to comfort, provide companionship, provide guidance and increase our courage.

This Emmanuel is so central to Matthew's gospel. It is woven through most of the stories, parables, miracles, teachings, feedings, and healings across this book. In fact this idea is so central to this gospel that if we somehow missed it and arrive at the end of the book -- the author makes Emmanuel the very last words of the gospel. In the closing verses Jesus says to his followers, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, **I am with you always**, to the end of the age."

There it is one last time: Emmanuel.

Joseph experienced it, he fell asleep thinking he had made the best decision but had his eyes and heart transformed by God-with-us. Mary experienced God with us as her fear turned toward joy. You and I can experience this birth also. This is the posture for which Advent seeks to prepare us. We see it in this Holy Couple...

Joseph and Mary were scared; but turned toward God, not away!
They felt confused; but accepted God's wisdom above their own human ideas.
They felt alone; until the child was born and Joseph looked into the baby's newborn eyes and said, "you ARE Emmanuel."

Transformation becomes ever more possible when we have the right posture toward God. Paving the way in a messy world. Staying awake to God when every bone in our body is tired. But, when we put ourselves in a position to allow this birth to be a birth inside us; a birth of compassion, love, and faithfulness we begin to see the awesome and constant ways in which God's love enters our hearts and calls us to the life that really is life for one and all.

Amen