

Sermon December 22, 2013 Luke 1:26-38 Matthew 1:18-25 "Letting Emmanuel Have Room"

We heard two lessons today, two weeks' worth of Advent in one Sunday because of the weather conditions last week. Two individuals, Mary and Joseph, one a young inexperienced female, the other a man who had agreed to take Mary as his wife, had to deal with some unexpected changes in their lives. Surely they had expectations as they headed towards married life, but just as surely, neither could have anticipated the challenges and blessings *God* had in store for them.

According to Gospel-writer Luke, when the angel Gabriel appeared to the young peasant-girl Mary, disclosing to her the life-disturbing, overwhelmingly wonderful/challenging news that she would bear a son who would be called "Son of the Most High," she did not immediately dance with joy. Instead, her initial response was to be troubled, and to thoughtfully question, "How can this be?"

"How can this be?" Mary could certainly see why this could not be. She was young, poor, unmarried, anything but "most high," and a virgin. But somehow, Mary was able to move from "How can this be?" to "Let it be, according to God's will." Somehow, in her pondering, with the gift that her older cousin Elizabeth would be able to fully share in her joy of pregnancy and expectancy, somehow she was able to trust the proclamation of the angel, who declared, "With God nothing will be impossible." And somehow, throughout the life of her son, and even as she finally stood at the cross of his death, she was apparently able to hold fast to her stance of faith: "Let it be."

Gospel-writer Matthew lets us in on what the first Christmas must have been for Joseph. Joseph and Mary were betrothed, engaged. In their world this was a binding contract, breakable only by divorce. A betrothed couple was just about married, but they did not have sexual relations until the official marriage. So imagine how it was for Joseph when his beloved found herself to be pregnant! Joseph knew he was not the father, so the only logical explanation was that Mary had committed adultery. This was punishable by death. Joseph cared greatly for her, though, so after agonizing deliberation, he decided to dismiss her quietly, without a formal and public divorce. Just as Joseph had come to this decision, God intervened, providing an angel to assuage Joseph's fears about how Mary had become pregnant, and also to give Joseph an assignment of his own. He was to trust God, and he was to give the baby the name "Jesus," which means Savior. Not only would Jesus be the Savior of his people, he was also to be the fulfillment of the scriptures. He would be "Emmanuel," God with Us.

We are told that when Joseph awoke, he believed the dream he had had, and thus he took action as he had been commanded, taking Mary as his wife and, when the time came, naming the child Jesus.

Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor gives her perspective on Joseph:

"...The heart of this story is about a just man who wakes up one day to find his life wrecked:

his wife pregnant, his trust betrayed, his name ruined, his future revoked. It is about a righteous man who surveys the mess he has had absolutely nothing to do with and decides to believe that God is present in it. With every reason to disown it all, to walk away from it in search of a cleaner, more controlled life with an easier, more conventional wife, Joseph does not do that. He claims the scandal and gives it his name. He owns the mess - he legitimates it - and the mess become the place where the Messiah is born.

“...(Do we hear it?)...This quiet, peripheral man,... is the one to watch. He is the one in the story who is most like us, presented day by day by day with circumstances beyond our control, with lives we would never have chosen for ourselves, tempted to divorce ourselves from it all when an angel whispers in our ears: ‘Do not be afraid. God is here. It may not be the life you had planned, but God may be born HERE, too, if you will permit it.’” (Selected and edited from *Gospel Medicine*, p. 154-157, Barbara Brown Taylor) Emmanuel - God with us - found room in Joseph’s heart.

What does this mean for us today? It means that if we have doubts about God in our lives, we are in good company. If we find ourselves afraid or perplexed or disappointed by what life presents, we can remember Joseph's dilemma as he tried to decide what to do about Mary... It means especially that our salvation comes through Emmanuel: "God With Us."

Years ago a woman rocked back and forth in her chair, staring ahead with eyes long blind from glaucoma. She was looking at something, though, deep within or perhaps very far beyond where I could see. She had let me visit her, since I was her pastor, but as I came in and handed her a poinsettia plant she sort of snorted and said, "O Lord, what will I do with a plant? It is good of you to come and see me, but I cannot take care of that plant. Give it to somebody who doesn't have anything." I looked around her little room, and to me it looked as though she didn't have much at all, but she straightened me out on this misconception very quickly. "I have everything I need. I have lived through almost 100 Christmases. Some have been full of family, full of fun and packages, full of stuff, others have been lean and filled to the brim with tears and grief. But whether they were full or empty, each one of them found a way to tell me that my God loves me, and that's all I need. That's all I'm going to need. My Lord loves me, and He's never let me down yet and He won't ever. The Lord is my Shepherd, God with me through it all!" Emmanuel had room in her heart.

When we lived on Long Island, a woman with whom I used to sing, who knew that one of the families in our church was having a hard time, dropped by to hand me an envelope of food store gift cards, a lot of them. I asked her if the chorus had given them. She looked embarrassed momentarily, and then said, "No, my husband and I decided that this is what we will give each other for Christmas this year. This way, we have deep joy." (pause) For Christmas, these two gave God room to work in their lives.

The carol, “God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen,” which we’ll probably sing today when we go caroling, proclaims that Jesus came "to save us all from Satan's power," but saving us from

OURSELVES may be the greatest thing Emmanuel can do. Jesus came to show us how to live "beyond ourselves," beyond "what can I get out of life," to learn instead the truth of Emmanuel, God with us, working in our lives.

Years ago in Bayville, NY, a man sat in one of our Bible study groups and told us of his alcoholism, mental illness, and time served in jail for various charges. It was in jail, he said, that it finally came to him that he couldn't save himself. He told us, "I got down on my knees and asked the Lord to come into my life and straighten me up. I prayed for him to save me from myself - from my illnesses and from my wrong choices. You know, the Lord came, and he has been saving me from myself ever since. Every time I pick up a bottle for a drink, he reminds me that he's with me, and I don't take it. Sometimes I don't even WANT a drink any longer. When I am tempted to skip my medicine, I remember that I am called to serve Jesus, and I know that if my mind isn't clear I cannot do that. God came into my life when I accepted Jesus as my Savior, and that is why I am in church and studying the Bible today. Life isn't perfect, but it is possible, thank God."

Emmanuel, God with us. This is a promise given to us, today. It means that we don't have to make ourselves "holy" enough before God will notice our lives. It means we don't have to climb a high mountain and shout out proper or loud prayers in order to get God's attention. It means that God has already come to be with us. Here's an illustration: One Christmas day a father was helping his children build a snowman. A plane was passing overhead and the smallest child, gazing up at the plane, asked, "Daddy, how do people climb up into the sky to get into planes?"

"They don't, child," replied the father. "The planes come down out of the sky to pick up the people." (Original source unknown)

Christmas tells us in the picture of human love that God understands the afflictions of God's people, God has heard our cries, and God has come to us to deliver us. It is God's leap into human history that we see in Bethlehem's manger, and God's invitation to each one of us to dare to trust that with God, "Peace," "Love," "Life," and "Joy" are not impossible. "Let it be, let God be in our lives." Give Emmanuel - God with us - room.

No matter what is going on in your life, no matter the condition of the world around us, God is with us, bringing forth ways to give us life. That which is proclaimed in Isaiah 43 is made clear this season in the coming of Christ:

"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and through rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior."
(Isaiah 43:2-3)

Fear not. Even in the bleakest winter, there is reason to rejoice. May we, in our hearts, make room for God's work as we say to God, "However you want to work in or through my life, let it be so." Amen.

Now, in faith, let us open our hearts to God and make room for God's work as we sing the song, "You Are Mine," which poignantly proclaims that God is with us, which means we do not have to be afraid.