

We're so close to Christmas, on the very edge of the Advent season.... But today's Gospel lesson offers no friendly beasts. No choirs of angels, no shepherds. No announcement: "Peace on the earth, good will to men." No new-born babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. Not even a baby shower.

Instead, Matthew opens the Christmas story with a scandal. ...The gospel according to Matthew begins with this dilemma: a man discovers that his fiancée is pregnant. He knows that they have had no intercourse, so the natural assumption would be that his fiancée has been with someone else during their engagement. Truly a scandal, especially since in Joseph's day a woman should be stoned to death for infidelity.

So why would the gospel-writer Matthew go and mess up a warm Christmas story with such an "on-the-edge" dilemma? Matthew's story is earthy; it's the Christmas story without the halo on. It's the story of a man who wants to do the right thing responding to the promptings of God and trusting what he could not know for sure... Joseph was put on the edge: faith or no faith? Trust or no trust? Joseph's story is that of a man who decided to risk being obedient to God instead of being simply "right" by the standards of his day. Joseph's willingness to take a huge risk provided room for God's Son to be born, "to save us from our sins."

The Bible is filled with testimony as to the lengths God will go to save us. Throughout all of history, God has put up with us and prepared ways for us to learn to trust God's ways instead of our own.

Again and again in the Old Testament, God asked God's people to trust him. The people would honor God for a while, then get comfortable and forget God, or else get scared of threatening foreign powers and turn to other nations for help instead of relying on God... Finally, each time, God would let the people be overrun by a bully country, and finally the people would come to their senses in their desperation and cry out to God for help.. And God would help them, again. Until the cycle repeated itself.

The theme, "Immanuel," God-with-us, was pronounced in the Book of Isaiah, about 865 BCE, when Judah's king Ahaz was overwhelmed by a coalition of nations that attacked him because he had refused to join their fight against the big bully of the day, the Assyrians. So Isaiah proclaimed in the seventh chapter that a virgin would conceive and bear a son, and he would be called Immanuel, which means God with us. It was a right-then sign of God's presence and power for King Ahaz, but for Christians today it was also a prediction of Jesus' birth and part of God's overarching promise to be with God's people throughout all time.

Just as God's people have always had trouble trusting and honoring God, Christians today still struggle to trust the Immanuel message. When illness strikes or misunderstanding occurs or something in life falls apart, it's hard to see how God is with us. For this reason, it is a blessing that gospel-writer Matthew shared a bit about Joseph's challenge to trust God when his life was

shaken up.

Usually as Christians approach Christmas we think of the lovely Silent Night scene in Bethlehem when a well-mannered newborn delights his grateful parents as angelic hosts and well-wishers surround them with peace and harmony. It is a wonderful image. But it isn't the entire, real-life story.

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 almost 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. He cared greatly for her, and 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 name the baby 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 been given, and thus did as he had been commanded, taking Mary as his wife and naming the child Jesus.

Joseph was able to do this because God intervened, preparing him through that dream, and helping him get to a place where he could trust God with his life.

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 by what life presents, we can remember the huddling folks in Jerusalem as they were given the promise that even though they were scaping for food, soon one of their babies would have rich produce (curds and honey) to eat (Isaiah 7:15); and we can set next to our struggles Joseph's dilemma as he tried to decide what to do about Mary. The Bible promises us that God understands our fears, our needs, our hearts, and God prepares us, that we may be led to LIFE. Our salvation depends on Immanuel: "God With Us." The prophet Isaiah warned King Ahaz in 7:9, "If you do not stand firm in faith, you will not stand at all." None of us can stand for long without God with us.

The Christmas story tells us that we never need stand alone. Whether terrorists threaten us or our checkbook is totally unable to handle the bills, God is with us. If we've been given a diagnosis we've been dreading or failed miserably in our work, God is with us. If we are lonely or too inundated by the demands of those around us, God is with us. If our identity has been stolen and cybercrime has overwhelmed us, God is not shaken; God knows exactly who we are! As Paul declared in Romans 8: "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus."

If God is truly with us, then all ground is holy ground; every moment is a gift from God. Life,

and all the troubled, ambiguous, and even messy moments which make up human life become part of God's work...

It's not easy to trust God when life seems out of balance. It never has been easy. That's surely part of the reason God gave us Jesus: to give us a flesh-and-blood image of God's commitment to us. Here's an illustration told in many versions throughout the years:

A young boy was having difficulty going to sleep in a strange bed. Though he had stayed over at grandma's before the sounds of the wind and rain made the dark room seem frightening. "Mama! Mama! he called out." After reassuring him that she and grandma were right downstairs the boy's mother turned to leave once again. The young boy protested that the room was too scary and that he did not want to be left alone. "But you are never really alone," the mother said, "You know that whether you are here or in your bed at home God is with you." "I know that God is here," said the boy, not wanting her to think that he doubted God's presence. "But," he continued, "I need somebody here with skin on." In the Bethlehem birth, God gave us "someone with skin on." (pause)

Maybe you're all prepared for Christmas or perhaps you're still struggling to get ready. God is all prepared. God knows what we need and God is quite capable of making sure we receive it in life.

Whatever you are facing in your life, know that your Savior is with you. The babe born in Bethlehem suffered, died, and rose again for us, leaving us an everlasting promise of nothing short of IMMANUEL: "Behold, I am with you, even to the end of the age" (Matt 28:20). Stand in the faith that dares to trust in those things we cannot see, understand or even imagine. For God is coming, God is even now among us, God has prepared Light to shine in this world's darkness, Light that no darkness can ever overcome. Immanuel - God is with Us! Thank God! Amen.