

“Being Aware of Emmanuel”  
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury  
Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25

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Fourth Advent

*Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.* Immanuel, in Isaiah’s prophecy, was not Jesus, though the name then, as when we hear Matthew use it, means, “God with us.”

Over 700 years before Jesus was born, the prophet Isaiah was telling King Ahaz of God’s promise to protect his kingdom from invasion. King Ahaz was not a fast learner, so it took a couple of security briefings from God, before Isaiah finally offered the sign of a woman bearing a child. The identity of neither is clear, though many scholars believe the pregnant woman was King Ahaz’s own wife, and the child was their son and future king, Hezekiah. In the end, the kingdom fell, but the concept of “God with us” as Immanuel remained.

When Isaiah’s prophecy was translated into Greek, the Hebrew word “young woman,” meaning a woman of marriageable age, was changed to a word meaning virgin. Matthew uses the Greek translation when he quotes Isaiah in our Gospel reading. The use of “virgin” enabled Matthew to explain the workings of the Holy Spirit amid the social norms for marriage at the time.

Virgin births in Roman culture and history were lauded to mark chosen rulers as divinely chosen. While we do not presume Matthew is trying to keep up with the Romans, first century readers would likely hear the parallel, and in its context, Matthew’s Emmanuel, who will be named Jesus, meaning Savior, will stand against both the powers of empire and rulers of temple.

Before reading our lesson, let us review the practice of marriage in the first century. As today, couples became engaged, with the term betrothal sometimes being used. In so doing, the couple makes a commitment to one another, with a wedding planned, either for a date certain or sometime in the future. In biblical times, each would continue to live with their parents and not be sexually active. A key difference is that, in Jesus’ time a couple was considered legally married upon becoming engaged, or betrothed, though the wedding had not yet taken place. Thus, if there is infidelity during the betrothal, it is adultery, and the couple does not simply break up, but divorce papers must be filed.

Infidelity is what appears to be the case in our Gospel lesson. Thus, we have a mini-soap opera, but rather than needing eight hour-long episodes to expose and solve it, Matthew tells the provocative story in eight verses. He will reveal to us Mary has become pregnant by the Holy Spirit. That Joseph has no clue this is the case creates intrigue. The story centers on Joseph’s response before and after a dream.

As we are still in Advent, I am tempted read the lesson right up to the last sentence where Matthew announces Jesus’ birth, and Joseph accepts paternity by naming his son; but there, I already spoiled the ending, so let’s listen to all of Matthew’s brief but spectacular account of Jesus’ birth. Matthew 1:18-25.

<sup>18</sup> Now 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. <sup>19</sup> Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup> But 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. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet [Isaiah]:

<sup>23</sup> 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel',

which means, 'God with us.' <sup>24</sup> When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took Mary as his wife, <sup>25</sup> but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

"Go big or go home." It sounds like a coach's words to prepare a team for a playoff game; it is, in fact, how writer Jill Duffield caught my attention as she rephrased the choice King Ahaz is given by God. God tells the king to *ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.* "In other words, go big or go home." "Ahaz chooses the latter," which prompts Duffield to ask, "Is it Ahaz' faithfulness that refuses to ask for a sign or his fear? Ahaz may not want a sign from God because those God-signs point the way in big neon letters." Receiving a sign and refusing its direction is a mark of disobedience. "If Ahaz asks for and receives a sign, he may have to change his plans in order to be a part of God's." [Duffield, Jill, Looking into the Lectionary for the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent, 2016 – online email sent to Presbyterian Outlook subscribers]

So, Ahaz resolves, *I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.* Of course, Isaiah gives him the sign anyway, *Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.*

Sometimes we couch our fear in righteousness. "I will not test God by asking for a sign," sounds wonderfully faithful, yet perhaps it also allows us to ignore signs that might come our way. In that sense, we turn to Joseph, who learns of his betrothed's pregnancy and his sure knowledge he is not the father. The text immediately uplifts Joseph's righteousness, but could perhaps his righteousness have stood in the way of the sign he was being given?

It all seems noble. Joseph could have publicly disgraced Mary and she would have suffered for her offense, possibly even a stoning. Joseph might have suffered a bit of embarrassment, but would probably be supported by those who condemned "that woman." Quite possibly, his dismissal of Mary quietly would have more tongues wagging if it was revealed.

Now, I will admit that in my initial study notes on this text, I found myself commending Joseph, and as I will share, he had to make three decisions when he is given a sign in a dream. So, I was not prepared when Jill Duffield linked King Ahaz and Joseph when she wrote of Joseph's decision to dismiss Mary quietly. "Like Ahaz before him, even righteous Joseph gets God all wrong. No, I won't test God. No, I won't publicly shame this woman. God wouldn't want me to engage in such behavior. I know exactly what to do. I know the right thing to do. I know the Godly thing to do.... I will dismiss her quietly. That is what a righteous, God-fearing, God-following, faithful person should do."

Yet, where Duffield caught me was her question, "Have you ever been Joseph? Quietly dismissing the will of God out of righteousness?... Quietly dismissing the will of God as a result of our own righteousness allows us to remain comfortable. Who wants to explain why the woman you are engaged to has come up pregnant well before the wedding? Shame and ridicule won't be only Mary's if Joseph stays the course. If we dismiss her quietly we can feel good about ourselves, we could have done much worse and we can get on with our life. A win-win." [Duffield, *Ibid.*]

Yet, Joseph, to his credit, has the courage to close his eyes, and after a dream and an angel's words, he sets aside what he was convinced was the right and righteous decision. He sees and faithfully follows the sign he initially did not see.

Now on signs, I have shared before how I am wary of those who interpret either world events or natural disasters as signs, almost always interpreted to be God's wrath for the sins of others, not one's own. Yet, I recognize my wariness can cause me to be so cautious I miss a sign placed before me, and can dismiss it quietly to avoid having to face it boldly.

A good friend, trained in dream interpretation, speaks of dreams as unopened letters from God. If that is the case, I have a pile of mail to open. Yet, Joseph's willingness to close his eyes, dream, and then open the God-sent message caught my attention. As I mentioned earlier, I see him making three critical decisions to come to the point of not dismissing Mary quietly, and thus not dismissing God's desires.

First, Joseph paid attention to his dream, and this is not the only dream he will have in Matthew's Gospel, joining the Magi as those who receive instructions in dreams. Second, Joseph believed the Spirit could impregnate his betrothed. I don't imagine he spent a lot of time figuring out the mechanics of that, so better to simply believe. And third, Joseph followed the angel's directions, believing all that was happening was "of the Lord." At that point, without fear of embarrassment, or even legal ramifications, Joseph took Mary as his wife, and after she gave birth, he adopted her child by giving him his name.

What lingers for me is the power of Emmanuel, meaning, God with us, in both our texts. I thought about phrases we use similar to "God with us," though perhaps in a secular sense. We might be told, "I have your back," which offers a sense of security and protection, that we are not alone as we move ahead. Or perhaps someone tells us, "I am behind you 100%," indicating a support for something we might be initiating. The simpler, "I am here for you," is an assurance of help, care, or even rescue. I find such phrases echoed in the psalms as concepts of God. "I have your back, I am behind you 100%, I am here for you," convey our understanding of God as protector, refuge, help, deliverer.

I think of Emmanuel, of “God with us,” as different, and while seemingly more passive, it may indeed be more powerful. In a simple way, I think of “God with us,” as the friend or younger sibling who was always at our heels as a kid. Hard as we tried, we could rarely ditch them. So, as much as we might want some time away from Emmanuel, from God with us, so we can just do our own thing, we are probably better off if we do not ditch Emmanuel.

Emmanuel is easily dismissed by people who prefer to feel comfortable and secure. Emmanuel is ditched by those who never believe they are wrong. Emmanuel is not needed by those who applaud their own righteousness. Emmanuel is ignored by persons or nations who only see the enemy of God’s way as “the other,” the one or ones different than oneself, or one’s kind.

Emmanuel is needed by those who sense being called to be a part of God’s covenant history, realizing they need a “God with us” presence to help take off masks of pride so they can see the God-signs. One writer suggests the sign of Emmanuel comes out of “...God’s eternal self-consistency. God’s covenant with the creation is to redeem it from the inside out. The promise of a Messiah is grounded in God’s intention to restore us and to transform the world as we have come to make it into our own image.” [Don Salier, Feasting on the Word, Year A, volume 1, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 78]

As Jill Duffield again writes for this fourth Sunday of Advent, “Emmanuel, God with us, will soon arrive. The ultimate divine intervention into our ignorance, self-righteousness, obliviousness and sinfulness is coming. Soon we won't have to guess at the will of God, we will witness it. Just like Joseph, we will need to change our plans, jettison our prior sense of what is right and required, and go a whole new, life-upending way. We will be asked to believe the unbelievable until the unbelievable undeniably appears.” [Duffield, op. cit.]

Emmanuel is not cheered at rallies of joyous triumph, nor with a ticker tape parades of celebration. Receiving Emmanuel calls for humility that embodies confession and hope. Receiving Emmanuel means walking each day with an alertness to a holy presence, a keen awareness of God with us, really with us – hearing what we say, knowing what we think, seeing what we do. Receiving Emmanuel, God with us, means listening for and being alert to the signs coming our way, in dreams, in images, in events, in people. With Emmanuel, God with us, we will hear the choice, “Go big or go home.” And we will know what to do so as not to dismiss God’s desires.