***EMMANUEL!***

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December 22, 2019

Texts: Matthew 1:18-25 and Isaiah 7:10-14

The Christmas story is full of supernatural events. Angels pop in and out of Joseph’s dreams, Mary’s mornings, Zechariah’s temple duty, and shepherds’ night watch. Young Mary is suddenly “with child” without the usual preamble to pregnancy. The unborn child that Mary bears is greeted by the unborn child of her cousin Elizabeth with an unusual intrauterine leap. A bright star suddenly appears in the sky to guide wise men from the east to the side of the newborn Jesus; then in a dream those same wise men receive an angelic visit telling them to go home another way. Another angel interrupts Joseph’s dreams to tell him to head south to Egypt ASAP, which makes you wonder whether Joseph was getting nervous about going to sleep at night for fear of what angel might invade his dreams next! The Christmas story is overflowing with surprising – sometimes spectacular – divine interventions into an otherwise sleepy world, events that herald the birth of a child who is the long-awaited messiah of God. And the great irony is that this child who is fully God as one might expect from all the supernatural surprises, is also fully human, the infant son of Mary, a mystery that is called *incarnation*, but which is perhaps best described by that other name by which he is known – *Emmanuel* which means, *God with us*!

The tidings of great joy for all people is all about the birth of a child who confirms in soft, vulnerable, tangible human flesh that God is with us, for us, among us, near to us, lest we have any doubts on that count. First century Jews chafing under Roman rule had a host of doubts on that very count. God seemed strangely absent from their lives. No prophet had been heard from for centuries, the Romans ruled their land, and the promises of God spoken through the prophets of old had yet to be fulfilled after five centuries of waiting. It seemed a long time for God to act and a long time for them to wait with any kind of realistic expectation that God would make good on the promises of a messiah who would come to save them. More than a few had begun to wonder if God had forgotten them.

Incarnation is God’s answer to the oft-raised question: Does God even remember us anymore? Does God care about us in trying times? Is this a God we can trust? It is an answer given, not in another verbal prophetic promise, but in God’s word made flesh, as tangible as a baby lying in a manger. It is the assurance that God is with us, fully identifying with us who are created in God’s image, fully embracing our pain, and wanting more fully to relate to us in the hope that we will more fully relate to God, or perhaps more accurately, more fully return to God. As Ann Weems puts it:

*In the midst of our bickering and battling, there is the persistent voice of the Holy One, who calls even now: ‘Return to me.’ It’s time to remember who we are and to whom we belong. We don’t have the option of the Church in the Tree, a Church just for me, for his name is not God-with-me, but Emmanuel, God-with-us.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

The birth of the savior is God’s call to us, one and all, to return to God, to embrace the child born of Mary, and in so doing, to embrace the God who sent him and is present in him. It is a God who loves and blesses us every one, to quote Tiny Tim, but a God who also loves and blesses us one and all. For the love of God is broad and deep, extending to the four corners of the earth and to the four chambers of our hearts.

“*If God had wanted to appeal directly to our minds, Mary would have written a book instead of bearing a child*,”[[2]](#endnote-2) suggests one writer. Belief in those tidings of great joy for all people is not an intellectual exercise; it is a matter of the heart that challenges us to willingly embrace the good news of the coming of a child who is the messiah of God who comes to save us. It is the kind of trust that inspired Mary to say to the angel, “Let it be with me according to your word;” the kind of trust that inspired Joseph to surrender his doubts about Mary’s chastity, take her as his wife and claim her son as his own; the kind of trust that inspired wise men to travel a great distance by the light of a star in order to find an unknown king. It is the kind of trust that the gospel writers encourage us to invest in this child who is born in a stable to a chorus of angels, who will die on the cross to a chorus of taunts, and who will be raised on the third day to a chorus of “He is risen! He is risen indeed!”

The incarnation is about all of those things, and the remarkable thing is that it is God who takes the initiative, God who comes to us in order to urge us to come to God. God does not wait for us to be good enough to merit God’s presence in our midst. God looks at us with all of our sinful choices and broken lives and fleeting faithfulness and misplaced loves and defiant attitudes, and God loves us anyway and comes to us anyway. Why would God do that? Why would God take the lowly form of a vulnerable child who grows to be an itinerant preacher and dies as a crucified victim in order somehow to save us? Why?

There was once a farmer who didn’t believe in Christ and asked the same question. “The story is nonsense,” he said, “Why would God lower himself to come to earth as a man?” One snowy evening as he sat by the fire, the farmer heard a thump on the window of his home. He looked out but could see little in the blinding snow. When the snow eased a little he ventured outside and found a flock of geese lost and stranded on his farm with no food or shelter. They had been heading south for the winter and were caught in the blizzard. Around and around his barnyard they flew in low circles, blindly and aimlessly. A couple had flown into the window of his house and lay stunned in the snow – that was the thump he’d heard. The farmer felt sorry for them, so he opened the barn doors to offer them a place for shelter. But the geese just fluttered around without venturing inside. The farmer tried to get their attention, tried shooing them and scaring them into the barn, tried enticing them with bread crumbs. But all his efforts were in vain and the geese only seemed more agitated and confused than ever. “What’s wrong with them?” he wondered. “Can’t they see this is the only place where they can survive the storm? Why won’t they follow me? If only I were a goose, I could save them.” Then he had an idea. He went into the barn and brought out one of his own geese and carried it in his arms among the wild flock. When he released it, his goose flew straight into the barn. One by one the wild geese followed. And as they did, it suddenly dawned on the farmer why God would come to earth as a man – to save them. If only I were a goose, he had said.

If only I were a human, God said. And because God is God, God could do what the farmer could not – God became human. In Jesus, God took our flesh and blood form and came into the rough and tumble world of the Middle East with a message of salvation. It was a world that was as mixed up, turbulent, and unsettled as is our world today. Could God have done it some other way? Perhaps, but God chose to enter our human predicament as a child born as other children are born, born not in a palace but in an out-of-the-way stable in an out-of-the way town called Bethlehem.

When you are tempted to bask in the glow of Christmas and all those supernatural events that heralded his coming, to treat it as a story of old and to forget the earthy reality of his birth, then hearken back to that name by which the angel said he would be known – Emmanuel – and its promise: GOD IS WITH US. For, the miracle of Christmas is not just in the songs of angels sung to shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night or the divine conception or the star which led the wise men from afar or the angels popping in and out of dreams. The miracle is that unto us a child is born who is the messiah of God, a very human child born to a very human mother, a child who is wholly human and wholly divine and thus alone can save us. That is why the angels sang their glorias and the wise men followed the star and we still celebrate his birth two thousand years later – because as John says, the Word became flesh and lived among us and we have seen his glory, full of grace and truth. His name is *Jeshua*, Jesus, which means, the Lord saves, and he is called Emmanuel, ‘God with us,’ for that is his promise: God is with us – even here, even now – with us still. Gloria in excelsis Deo! Amen

1. Ann Weems, Putting the Amazing Back in Grace, p.29 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. A student of Patrick Henry quoted in his book *The Ironic Christian’s Companion*, cited by J. Barrie Shepherd, *Whatever Happened to Delight?* Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2006, p.48 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)