

**Matthew 1: 18-25 “God With Us” Rev. Janet Chapman 12/21/25 Second Service**

In a couple days, we will celebrate Christmas – what comes to mind when you hear the word, “Christmas”? What images do you see? This time of year, we see images of the nativity scene with Mary and Joseph and various other characters. Mary is placid and comforting, usually gazing upon a sleeping baby Jesus in a manger; Joseph, a common carpenter, is standing off to the side. There is nothing awkward about his stance, even after all hell just broke loose trying to find a safe place for Mary to give birth, dirty animals all around, and shepherds lurking at the child of his soon-to-be bride. Such peaceful nativity scenes show up all around us, but if we take the time to look deeper, we might recognize that this scene was anything but a stress-free affair for the quiet man in the back, Joseph. For this scripture-obeying man, the whole event turned his world upside down when his fiancé announced, “I am pregnant.” His righteous, coherent world fell apart – how could something like this happen to them? Joseph could have demanded Mary’s death, believing her to be unfaithful, which would have saved his reputation and exile from community.

An angel comes to Joseph in a dream, which is never a stress-free moment in one’s life, and tells him that the child in Mary’s womb is from God. Joseph is to wed Mary and take the baby as his own, naming him Jesus. This will fulfill the prophecy that a virgin will conceive a son and they shall name him Emmanuel. We aren’t told that Joseph said anything in response, maybe he was stupefied into silence by the utter strangeness of it all. Whereas Joseph had known God through scripture in the past, now he is being introduced to a God who speaks through a child, a babe with an unusual birth, an unplanned pregnancy, and Joseph was dumbfounded. Imagine his reaction after the dream, bolting upright in bed in the middle of the night in a cold sweat, wondering if he was hallucinating? Then came the complications of traveling with a woman 9 months pregnant to an over-crowded Bethlehem and then fleeing to Egypt with a newborn to avoid the child’s execution. Nothing peaceful about that. I wonder if any of you have been awakened by troubling dreams that left you questioning your future, asking where is God in all this mess?

Some have pointed out that Joseph's next steps were based on whether or not he believed Mary was still a virgin or not? I fear that sells this righteous man way too short, it keeps him locked into the rigidity of the law rather than allowing him, and us, to be surprised by God. Some folks get all bent out of shape questioning whether Mary was actually a virgin or not? In researching the original Hebrew books which were translated into Greek between the third century BCE to and 132 BCE, a Hebrew word, "almah," is used in Isaiah 7:14, the text referred to in our Matthew text today. The Hebrew word "almah" has various meanings including "young woman, girl, or virgin." An argument can be made that "almah" means young woman the same way that "elam" means young man. Scholars have argued that it is this word that has caused so much trouble in the interpretation of Isaiah 7:14's prophecy quoted in Matthew, "the virgin shall conceive and bear a son." In Matthew's version, the original Hebrew word "almah" gets translated in Greek to be "parthenos" which exclusively means "virgin," thereby changing the word from Isaiah's original prophecy. Even if Isaiah did mean "virgin," the verbs he used meant he wasn't predicting an unnatural birth. The phrase "to conceive" implied that even if the young woman had been a virgin at the moment of the prophecy, she would not have been at the moment of "conception" because the verb implies a completed action, it had already occurred. Therefore, it seems to me that in God's mind, none of this was important or significant; Mary's virginity was not a central part of the narrative. The disagreements over the various translations only distract us from the reality of the Divine coming as a child to show the path to salvation, to healing and wholeness in our human state of being. The sad reality is that more harm has been done because of the wording in Isaiah and Matthew than these authors could have ever imagined; just one more thing which has muddied the waters of our serene Nativity scene.

Yet if we are being completely honest, muddy waters are so often part of daily life. Consider for a moment a grandma talking to her pregnant granddaughter, "Now listen, dear. I want you to name your child after your grandpa Glenn." The young woman agrees. "Ok, Grandma, his name will be Glenn." Later you hear that the

decision fulfilled a prediction once made by the pregnant woman's father that her firstborn will be named "Harvey." So which is it: Glenn or Harvey? In Matthew 1, the angel says to name the baby Jesus, and Matthew turns right around and says, "That's right: he will be little baby Emmanuel which means 'God with us'." And then the baby is born and he's "Jesus." Jesus, Emmanuel... Emmanuel, Jesus – which is it? It isn't clear and maybe that is yet another point in our nativity story according to Scott Hoezee. You can't speak the one without invoking the other. Jesus equals Emmanuel. Jesus equals God with us, in all our flesh-and-blood realities and messiness. God with us in dirty diapers, God with us nursing at Mary's breast, God with us in learning to eat small pieces of bread and drinking from a cup without spilling all down the chin. God with us in the muddy, stinky waters of barn animals who are anything but sanitary. God with us among the pots and pans stacked up in the sink as much as the quirky, foreign astrologers, and among all the rest of the Gospel's curious characters. God with us. God with the prostitutes and the lepers and the outcast in whose company Jesus would delight again and again. God at the dinner table with a chive visibly stuck between the incisors; in the moments your beloved child sneers, "I can't stand you;" when your dear spouse stares at you with an Alzheimer's glaze and absently asks, "What was your name again, dear?" God breaking the bread like the body will be broken, God lifting the cup of forgiveness to the lips. God with us in all our ordinary days and times, as Jesus would say to bookend Matthew's Gospel, even unto the end of the ages. Always. It is murky waters like C.S. Lewis points out. He once wrote, "Christianity is a thing of great comfort. But it doesn't begin in comfort. It begins in distress and there's no use trying to get around the distress in order to get to the comfort."

Joseph the carpenter did what carpenters do. He put the broken and sawed-off pieces of wood together in order to form something beautiful. Yet that night when God came to Joseph through an intrusive angel and called him to receive, love, nurture and protect this unplanned child, Joseph had to navigate the dis-comfort of it all to support God's salvation of the world. God is with you even in those times when you

are so angry with God that you refuse to meet God's eyes. But even when you feel like you can't look at God, God never looks away from you, if for no other reason than Jesus' name says it all, Emmanuel, God with us. It might not be the nativity scene you or I imagined, but it is the scene that turned the world upside down and our lives right-side up. Amen.