

God Is with Us
Isaiah 7:10-14
Matthew 1:18-25

“...and you shall call his name Emmanuel, which means ‘God is with us.’”

There is no census, no trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem, no inn overbooked, no swaddling clothes or manger, no shepherds or heavenly host singing. We are in Matthew’s Gospel this year, a Gospel written to a divided Jewish community a few decades after the destruction of the Temple but before the appearance of rabbinic Judaism. Once again, God is gone. Matthew writes hoping to convince his fellow Jews, in spite of all the evidence, that Jesus was the long awaited Messiah promised from David’s line, the savior sent from God to dwell with them now that God’s dwelling place in Jerusalem had been reduced to rubble by the Romans. To know Matthew’s purpose is to notice details and connections that we miss when we read it through two thousand years of church doctrine about the virgin birth or the two natures of Christ or even the incarnation.

For instance, Matthew begins his Gospel with a sentence that is chock full of attention grabbers for his community: “An account of the genealogy (the genesis, the birth) of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” Beginning with Abraham, Matthew counts fourteen generations of patriarchs to David; and from David fourteen generations of kings to the exile; and from the exile fourteen generations of David’s descendants to Jesus—though if you are counting, it is only thirteen generations. Some say the church is the fourteenth generation. Matthew is telling us that Jesus is heir to Abraham, through whom all nations will be blessed, including us; and Jesus is heir to God’s promises made to David and so to the Jews. This had to be a hard sell to a community that felt betrayed by its own history!

The other hard sell involved the role of a woman in the story he was about to tell. So Matthew includes Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba in Jesus’ genealogy. All were foreigners, perhaps another shout out to us Gentiles. But more to the point of the next part of Jesus’ birth story, there are dual details common to each woman’s story: first, these women took the initiative to move the story along; and second, they all had a somewhat strange, even scandalous relationship to their partner. Rabbinic Judaism saw these strange unions and unlikely initiatives as God’s real presence in history on behalf of the promised Messiah. Each foreshadows the initiative and scandal of Mary.

Yet when Matthew turns from the genealogy to his scant story of Jesus’ birth, it is not Mary but Joseph, son of David, who enters the spotlight. The bookends and bare details of Jesus’ birth are this: “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”; and “he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.” I imagine Matthew spending hours, even days on those two sentences! Matthew’s first point is that Joseph contributed nothing to Jesus’ conception, to Jesus’ coming into the world. Jesus was all God’s doing. More about that in a few minutes! Yet Matthew’s second point is that, because Joseph named the child, Jewish law and Matthew’s readers considered Jesus to be the heir of Joseph, son of David. In other words, he was eligible to be a candidate for Messiah. Matthew’s sole interest, in spite of the church perseverating about the implied gynecology of Jesus’ genesis, was making his birth narrative confirm and continue the story of God’s redeeming purposes in human history beginning with Abraham.

But there is a cliff-hanger in this story. It all could have been otherwise. According to Deuteronomy, Joseph holds Mary’s life and the life of the unborn child in his hands. If a man has reason to believe his betrothed is not a virgin, Deuteronomy says, the man may accuse her before the elders of the town. If the charge is false, he is fined and cannot divorce her ever! If the charge is true, the woman shall be brought out to the entrance of her father’s house and stoned to death by the men of her town. Only in this way will the town be purged of evil.

Never before had I imagined the terror that must have overtaken Mary when she found herself with child. While a pregnant fourteen-year-old in those days was always at risk of dying in childbirth, Mary also had to have known that consenting to bear a child that was not the child of her husband would carry with it a death sentence. Joseph knew this too, being a righteous man—a just, ethical man who observed the Torah. Yet he was in a lose/lose situation. If he decided not to have her stoned but instead to divorce her quietly, he would bear responsibility for the effect that Mary’s unpurged evil might have on the whole community.

Add to that the fact that Joseph and Mary live in “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” Nothing tawdry happens quietly in a small town! The elders and Mary’s father would surely want to know his grounds for divorcing her. Even if Joseph claimed incompatibility (in Deuteronomy it is called “disliking” her), the moment the bump began to show, the jig would be up: either the baby she carried was his or not. If his, they could not divorce; if not his, she was not a virgin and should be stoned.

But she was a virgin, according to Matthew, and she was carrying a child that was not Joseph's. Most any Jew being told this story would have seen the wiliness of God in every sentence. Enter an angel, a messenger from God, who lets Joseph in on God's plan. Ix-nay on the divorce, Joseph: you will wed Mary and take the child as your own by naming him, and his name will say it all: Jesus a.k.a. Emmanuel. God is with us in him who will save his people from their sins.

Matthew's community would go on to read a Gospel that was basically a Midrash, a story on the Moses story, with a surprise ending. Were they convinced? Not so much. Are we? Get ready for the second cliff-hanger! Joseph turns out to be a place holder for those of us who are, according to Matthew, the fourteenth generation after David. Like Joseph, we are in the position to continue the story of God's redeeming purposes in human history or to kill the story in another generation or two. Given that the begetting from one generation to another after Jesus has to do with belief and not blood, this is yet another twist in the plot of salvation that can still be otherwise. The God who entered the world through the "pain and riskiness of human gestation and childbirth," theologian James Alison observed, and was vulnerable "to the whole human skittishness of male honor and the potential for violence that preys on female dependency," now "subjects [God-with-us] to our interpretation." We are Joseph, left to decide if "this woman [is] an adulteress or the bearer of God to the world."

Consider W. H. Auden's interpretation in his *Christmas Oratorio*. Joseph has gone to a bar to deal with the news of Mary's pregnancy. His shoes shined, his pants cleaned and pressed...the bar gay, the lighting well designed, he waits for her and while he waits a chorus off-stage says, "*Joseph, you have heard/What Mary says occurred;/Yes, it may be so,/Is it likely? No.*" Then again, "*Mary may be pure,/But, Joseph, are you sure?/How is one to tell?/Suppose, for instance...Well...*" And finally, "*Maybe, maybe not./But, Joseph, you know what/Your world, of course, will say/About you anyway.*" Joseph responds, "Where are you, Father, where?/...Father, what have I done?/Answer me, Father...How then am I to know,/Father, that you are just?/Give me one reason.../All I ask is one/Important and elegant proof/That what my Love has done/Was really at your will/And that your will is Love." Gabriel replies, "No, you must believe;/Be silent and sit still."

We are Joseph Advent after Advent, asking God for one reason, for one important elegant proof that God is with us in this child and that this child is love. Confronted with the logically impossible and utterly unreasonable claim—that Mary is bearing in her womb God-with-us who will save us from life without God—we beg for a more believable story, something we can get our heads around, a few ethical propositions to live by would be enough.

Even more confounding to our post-modern minds, if Jesus lives, like Joseph we will have the problem of evil on our hands. We cannot square the world we live in with the news that God dwells with us. To read the first-hand account of the Roman siege of Jerusalem by Josephus under Nero, then Vespasian, then Titus is to think Syria and Aleppo and Assad. What difference, we say with the Jews, has Jesus made? What sort of savior would leave us in the lurch of human hatred and violence and terror? But the story and the church's confession have not changed in two thousand years: in Jesus God-is-with-us. What God? The God who has chosen to be vulnerable to us.

What to do? We can quit this story for a number of others that we think will help us make sense of the mess we have made of the world, if not exactly get us out of it. Or we can go story-less: intellectually stone Mary and the child in her womb with the important and elegant proofs of science or with all the reasons we give for our enlightened mind's inability to suspend disbelief. Or in this season taken over by the culture, we can resolve to divorce ourselves quietly from Matthew's narrative while keeping up the appearance of a happy holiday so as not to create a scene. The "otherwise" in all of these options is the attempt, on our part, to keep him from being born in us and in our children and in the world.

Or, says Auden's Gabriel to us, we can be silent and sit still as those whose only role is to claim this child as our own. The uselessness of Joseph, according to later theologians, is the great good news that God-with-us comes to us "without any human action and without any effectual cause." The Love that came down at Christmas was not conceived by a human being but by God. "The clear and simple meaning of ['born of the *Virgin Mary*'],'" Karl Barth proclaimed over German airwaves in 1927, "is certainly that the Love which never ends is an event without comparison...[save for] the creation of the world out of—nothing...There is no 'why,' no 'whence,' no 'how.' God simply makes a beginning...," makes the free choice to be with us and not without us.

Come Christmas Eve, we shall return to the story that has a census, a trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem, an inn overbooked, swaddling clothes and a manger, shepherds and heavenly host singing. Still, even in Luke's story, we are Joseph, the one with no speaking role, the one who is silent and sits still, the one who allows himself to be told that the child born of Mary is God with us who is coming to save generations yet to be born from life without God in the world. A cliff-hanger indeed! It could be otherwise, save for the truth that the Love coming down at Christmas is the love that never quits, never ends, never gives up on you or on me. Thanks be to God! Amen.