

Why Do We Need a Savior? O Come, O Come Emmanuel
Isaiah 7:10-17
Matthew 1:18-25

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him *God is with us*.”

“Why do we need a savior?” you asked. Who could have imagined at the beginning of the season of Advent we would be so desperate for a savior at the season’s end? As our numbness retreats and unrelenting sadness sets in, the question on our lips is not why we need a savior but if we have one why has nothing really changed? Every minister has heard the plaint. If God-is-with-us, why have we not been saved from the unspeakable reign of death so evident in Newtown and in Washington? Come, O come thou Wisdom! If God-is-with-us why has God not intervened in the affairs of state with judgment and justice from this time forth and forevermore? Come, O come thou Key of David! If God-is-with-us why after two thousand years has peace not come to Syria and Jerusalem and the Congo and Afghanistan and Korea? Come, O come Desire of Nations! If God-is-with-us why were my prayers not answered? Come, O come Emmanuel!

Our questions presume a God with the power to save must have about him the so-called attributes of omnipotence, impassibility, omniscience, and omnipresence, to name a few. Though the question that haunts my own lament in the wake of unabated grief is the question of what the God whose intervention I may expect has to do with the God whose love came down at Christmas. For some reason, I have never been able to fit the former God into the cradle or onto the cross of the God I know in Jesus Christ. Rather in these darker days hastening toward Bethlehem, I can only believe enough to confess with Lutheran theologian Martin Marty: “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary was *really* born and that means He probably feared and alternatively enjoyed his bath, resented bedtime and wet the bed, was probably spanked and maybe spoiled, had

stomach aches and sties, sucked [his] thumb, talked, teethed, became affectionate at three, was wakeful when no one wanted him to be, whooped and was wounded like all who are really born...‘wherefore God hath highly exalted him...’ and wherefore he is my Lord.”

I believe in God who was whooped and wounded like all who are really born. This Advent I have met God in the eyes of the children whose vulnerability God assumed and I have seen God’s son in the teachers, in the first responders, in the soldiers whose sacrifice have followed his own and I have glimpsed God’s Spirit when, for a fleeting moment, I thought I saw a new community being born out of death. What difference in the world could it make to believe that in a real child born to a real mother we have to do with God and God has to do with us?

In the first place, if God has come to us, if God-is-with-us in this child, then in his human being and God’s being human the life we have lived without God is ended. Another way to say this is to say that the relationship for which we were made has been redeemed, and it has been redeemed not because we have turned toward home but because God in Christ has turned toward us. God has come all the way to us. “In traditional theology,” Czech theologian Jan Lochman writes, “the term ‘among us completely’ was coined” to underline that now “nothing human is alien to God....No sphere of our human reality is excluded from the encounter with Jesus.”

This, it seems to me, is the point of Martin Marty’s confession. Because Christ was really born, we have to do with him and he with us in each whoop and wound written into our numbered days: the fears, the angst, the quiet gladness, the aching loneliness, the wilderness of loss, the weight of grief, the joy of waking, the sweat on our brow, a friend’s trust, the pain of betrayal, the brevity, the grave. He assumed a human body with its needs and desires, a human mind with its questions and complexity, assumed time with its travail and tragedies, assumed space with its contingencies and limits, assumed a human heart with its vulnerability and

longing, a human life with its mortality: God-with-all-of-us except the distance we keep from God, without sin, says Scripture; therefore it is from that distance that God-with-us has saved us.

Or to put all this another way and borrowing Robert Jenson's words once again, "If God's only Son, true God from true God and all the rest of it, becomes [human] and is incarnate for us, this says that creaturely circumstances are the occasion of an event in the life of God...that creaturely circumstances are involved in what it means for God to be God!" No doubt, God could have chosen to be God otherwise except that God is love. Here is a God "to whom 'for us humans and for our salvation [he came down from heaven]' belongs to [God's] grasp of his own deity...." God assumed our mortality and so made room for us in the Eternal Life that he is, even as God accompanies us in this fleeting time between birth and death. Therefore we may live in a great hope.

Now what that means between birth and death sometimes seems minimal, hence the laments with which we began. Still we suffer, still we struggle, still we die, still we invariably cry out with the psalmists for the omnipotent God to rescue us in extremis when it is the God who *has* come to us that we most need, the God whose God-ness *is* vulnerability to our whoop and wound, whose essential mark is self-giving love, whose power is made perfect in weakness. This is the first word to say about the God who is with us.

But in a profoundly disordered nation and weary world, the second and equally astonishing claim is that the God whose God-ness is vulnerability and whose power is made perfect in weakness has also come to redeem human history. Both Luke and Matthew locate Christ's birth in the social and political arrangements of the day. Matthew begins his Gospel with "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham," tracing God's saving purposes from Abraham's descendents fourteen generations to the Davidic

promise of kingship and rule. Then Matthew maps out the lineage of God-with-us fourteen more generations from David to the Babylonian exile, and fourteen more from the exile until Christ. According to theologian David Jacobsen, Matthew is telling us that the promise to Abraham and to David that is now completely present in Jesus must be read through the realities of Exile (sin writ large—a people’s life without God in the world) and so of public catastrophe. “The mention of Babylon is not just for historical reasons. It is a reminder of the strange shadow under which even this story of a child unfolds: the pain of being under the thumb of [a violent and bloody] empire.”

Moreover, from his birth to his death, if Matthew is the one telling the story, violence continues to surround God-with-us. You cannot read the second chapter of Matthew’s Gospel this Christmas without being undone by the coincidence between then and now read in reverse: from the slaughter of the innocents in Newtown to the sycophants occupying the halls of Congress to Herod wielding the power of death at a so-called press conference on Friday morning, we mirror the fallen social order of first century Palestine save for the presence of even one wise man let alone three! Turn the page of our text this morning and you will find yourself in the halls of Herod’s government, filled with bumbling leaders who are incapable of acting unless ordered by the murderous decree of the king whose power is the power of death. When the wise men appear to ask the present king of the Jews where they might find the child born king of the Jews, fear reigns. Before the week is out, all the children around Bethlehem who were two years old or under (the estimated count said some pundit this week was twenty) were no more.

The story is ancient and is told to echo the story told when Moses was a baby, but the question both stories raise could not be more prescient. It is, in the words of a most remarkable and mostly unknown theologian named Arthur McGill, “What kind of power will we *worship* as

ruling our lives and our concrete situation?” Will we bow down before the power of death or will we worship him whose power was revealed in weakness, whose mercy never fails to make room for the exception and whose love conquered death not by killing but by dying on a cross. This is a terrible decision, for it has to do not only with how we will live our own lives, but with how we will raise our children to live in their own vulnerable flesh. Suffice it to say, even God chose vulnerability over violence for his son.

Then finally we must say something so astonishing that words cannot fit the claim into human understanding. We have mostly been wrestling with what it means to say, in the child born of Mary, that God assumed our humanity and our history in order to redeem both. The witnesses said more, said that in this human being the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

To be reasonable about this, nowhere in the New Testament is it said that Jesus “equals” God. Rather from the birth narratives to John’s final cry “Come Lord Jesus!”, “the confession of Jesus as God’s only son is a confession that in Him we behold ‘God on his way toward us.’ Here,” says Lochman, “every iota has to be contended for...because at stake are the most central concerns of salvation and faith....If Christ is only *like* God, [then] his history is not God’s exodus toward us, but just another of the many divine-human myths that flourished at that time when the ancient church was born.” But if in Jesus the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, then what entered human history on that silent night, what has entered your history and mine is a Savior. In his birth we are saved from the distance we keep from God because God in him has come toward us. In his life we are saved from the hopelessness of human history because we have glimpsed the promise of God’s reign fulfilled. In his death and rising we are saved from death’s dominion over our children by the God who has made room in himself, in Eternity, for his children.

When Brigid Boyle, a former associate minister of this church, decided to talk last week with six-year-old Park about the world in which he lives, she let his own questions guide the conversation. He asked about how the children died and she said a little; he asked who the adults were and what they were doing when they died, a question she could answer; and then he asked where Newtown was. They went to the map on the wall of his room where Brigid circled the state with her finger. Then Park put his little finger on Connecticut and declared, "So God's right there now." "Because of his visitation," says W.H. Auden's Simeon, "we may no longer desire God as if He were lacking: our redemption is no longer a question of pursuit but of surrender to Him who is always and everywhere present." Emmanuel. God-is-with-us. Thanks be! Amen.