

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Bart Roush
December 12, 2021
Matthew 1:18–25

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit

Startle us, O God, with the news that you come into the world in the most ordinary ways: in daily work, in love, in human birth and life and death. Startle us with your truth, that your love continues to come to be with us, to comfort and challenge us, to heal us and feed our deepest hunger. Now silence in us any voice but yours: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Like many churches, this time of year means a Christmas pageant at some point. There are different traditions of when churches hold their pageants. Many wait until Christmas Eve, but others pick a Sunday in Advent to hold the pageant. For those churches, there is a struggle between the messages of Advent – longing, waiting, expectation, prophetic visions of the future, the already and not yet – with the message of Christmas – God with us, the birth of the child. In the first church that I served, if I am remembering correctly, it was often the third or fourth Sunday of Advent that would look more like Christmas. Churches may have a Christmas cantata with special music, or it will be the Christmas pageant telling the story of Jesus birth, with disheveled angels with their crooked and makeshift wings, woolly sheep that miss their cues or wander off from the front of the church, the tallest kid who always has to play a wise man, and the reluctant Joseph who never has any lines and just has to stand there.

The pageant is sweet, the story is remarkable. It's all so lovely.

Except, it isn't all so lovely.

It's easy for us to miss – maybe because the story is so familiar to us by now. Maybe because it's told in pageants, or in hushed tones by candlelight, or in well-known and beloved hymns that paint a rosy picture of a baby who doesn't even cry. But there is heartache in this story.

Maybe we forget that Mary and Joseph were real people and not just characters in a play. Beyond the baby Jesus who never cries, maybe we think of Mary as a young blushing bride and not someone who had just given birth. Joseph is calm, collected, protective, paternal.

Except, there is heartache in the story.

Joseph and Mary were betrothed. It's almost the same as being married. It was a contract or covenant arranged by a rabbi. It was a religious commitment. There was probably a party once the betrothal happened – where all the cousins and aunts and uncles, friends from the synagogue would have attended. It was the public kick-off and official recognition to the wedding that would come later after the appropriate arrangements were made.

The wedding planning would begin. Joseph would go back to his home and prepare for his bride. Mary would stay with her parents as all the preparations would have been made. The two of them, Joseph and Mary would have started spending more time together.

And then the wedding would come. Think my big fat Greek wedding. Much fanfare and many people involved. When the day of the wedding came, the groom would arrive at the bride's parents house to take the bride and the marriage would become finalized. They would stand before the rabbi, surrounded by their families and friends – promises would be made. Then the party would start – and it would last for days. There would be a lot of food and drinking – some dancing and music. It would be an amazing time.

But it didn't happen that way. Before all of that, before the promises, before the days-long party, Joseph learns Mary is pregnant.

The only conclusion that Joseph could come to would be that Mary has been unfaithful to him and so likely experiences the pain, anguish, and sense of betrayal that any of us would have felt at such a devastating revelation.

Joseph, we have been told is a righteous man. It would mean Joseph was a man who lived his religion, a man who knows his scripture, knows there is a provision in the law and in the religious custom for just such

an occasion; actually, two. The most immediate and more severe provision is that Mary would have been publicly shamed and stoned – with rocks. To death.

The second option would have been to divorce her. Certainly, a less severe option – but one fraught for Mary. Mary’s shame would be public. Joseph, in order to get the divorce granted, would have to visit that same rabbi that was at the betrothal – the one who would have performed the wedding ceremony. Everyone would know – Nazareth is a small town – it wouldn’t take long for word to spread.

But we are told that Joseph had decided to dismiss her quietly. Not only was he a righteous man, but it seems, Joseph for the times, was also a kind man. He decided, after what I imagine was a difficult wrestling with the religious customs he was so familiar with and which he always tried to follow.

One preacher notes that, “If Joseph is suffering, it’s hard to imagine Mary comes through all this unscathed. Because Matthew narrates his account of the nativity from the point of view of Joseph, we get very little insight into Mary. But she likely detected the unexpected pain her pregnancy caused her betrothed and, if she sensed his intentions, would likely have had great cause for concern herself. Given the spare details of Matthew’s account, I recognize that much of this is clearly conjecture. But let’s keep in mind it takes a visit from an angel to calm all this down and orient Joseph to God’s intentions. And as angels usually get involved in the biblical story only when heavy-lifting is involved, I think it’s safe to say that the months leading up to Christ’s birth was not one blissful baby-shower after another but were fraught with anxiety and concern and flights of emotion we have all experienced at various times.”ⁱ

Maybe the humanness and the heartache is what we need to hear from the Christmas story this year. Not just the gooey heartwarming parts – but the messy, hard, uncertain, scary parts. Who among us hasn't felt heartache this year? Who among us hasn't had to wrestle in the night a little bit? Who among us hasn't felt uncertainty and fear?

Each of us has experienced upheaval and struggles, and disconnection.

Certainly, there is hope and love and peace and joy this year, even if it is the anticipation of those things, but we know there has been heartache too. There has been struggle and pain, and perhaps even some struggling with faith. And so maybe this story is a good reminder that God shows up in and through real people with real challenges.

“[God] didn't choose a fairy-tale princess to bear the savior, but rather an unwed peasant girl. [God] didn't choose a political or business success story to name and care for Jesus, but rather a man with his own doubts and questions who wanted to do the right thing but needed angelic guidance to accomplish it.”ⁱⁱ

“Through human biology, human experience, human frailty, human relationships, and human dignity, God demonstrates that the lines we draw in attempts to delineate earth from a far-off heaven are distortions. In Incarnation, God encounters us with a commitment that is less about condescension than it is about love, familiarity, and solidarity.”ⁱⁱⁱ

When the Angel visits Joseph, and calms him down, the angel tells him what to name the baby. But we get two names. Jesus and Emmanuel. Jesus because he will save us, and Emmanuel because we will know God is with us. Does it matter that there are two names?

Apparently, you cannot speak the one without invoking the other. Jesus equals Emmanuel.

Jesus equals God with us.

So maybe all of this humanness in this Christmas story, all the heartache and confusion, is all a helpful reminder that, indeed, God is with us.

God with us in all our flesh-and-blood realities and messiness.

God with us in the doubt and heartache.

God with us in the hard decisions.

God with us in the birthing of new possibilities.

God with us in the everyday and the ordinary.

“Christ among the pots and pans” as Teresa of Avila put it.

God with us.

God with us at the doctor’s office.

God with us as we fill out the unemployment paperwork.

God with us in the over-crowded corridors of hospitals.

God with us as we zoom.

God with us as we physically distance and wear masks.

God with us on the phone calls.

God with us...

God with us...

“God coming to be with us as we are. Not as we know we should be, or are trying to be, or have promised to be, or will be some day, but with us as we are now...today...in this moment.”^{iv}

God with us.

If God can show up amidst all the heartache and mess and broken traditions of Mary and Joseph, if God can be with, use, accept, honor

and hallow Mary and Joseph at the birth of Christ, so God comes to us in Christ to be with us, use us for good, accept us as we are, and hallow us with God's own presence. Even when it's a little messy.

Yes, God is really with us. Yes, God is with us, really and truly as we are. Yes, this is our Emmanuel.

God with us in these extraordinary, ordinary days. God with us.

God with us, again and always.

Amen

ⁱ David Lose, <https://www.davidlose.net/2016/12/advent-4-a-god-really-with-us/>

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matt Skinner, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/christmas-every-sunday>

^{iv} David Lose