

“God With Us”

Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25

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Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake

Ah, Christmas. So nostalgic. (Yes, I’ve been watching Hallmark Channel Christmas Movies!). So sentimental. Fat, fluffy sheep. Singing angels. The *‘little Lord Jesus,’* asleep on the hay. *Happy sigh.*

Except... well, except that no matter the candlelit warm glow, the truth is that the communities who wrote the birth narratives about Jesus of Nazareth *never* intended them to be sentimental at all. They were meant to point toward his *prophetic ministry of anti-imperialism and justice for oppressed and impoverished communities*, a ministry that ended in torture and execution – and yet nonetheless insisted upon the resilience of *hope, peace, joy, even love* in the midst of gruesome, relentless violence. So... what happened? What... *weakened* Christmas?

I’ve been mulling this idea over many an Advent. Of course, when the Roman Empire tried to *neutralize* the Christian movement, *adopting it* as the Imperial Religion and making it over in its own image, the *radical and transformative message* was forced to move underground and to the margins. We all sort of understand how political power manipulates religious and secular ideologies for its own oppressive purposes, throughout human history and today.

It’s more than that, though. I think sometimes, it’s just *too exhausting* to dwell in awareness of the *woundedness*, the *brokenness*, of the world. *Maybe sometimes, we just... need a break. A respite.* We want the comfort and joy, the merry, the peace on Earth, for a bit, without the mess.

There is a word for that need – we need *Sabbath*. Peaceful restoration is healthy and healing – and *vital*. The problem creeps in when we forget what Sabbath actually is for. Sabbath is *not* escapism, distraction, or amusing diversion. That is *avoidance*. Sabbath is much deeper; it is the peace that passes understanding, *because we find it when we turn toward the wounds, not away*. The *hug* after working out a disagreement and hurt feelings. The *meal* after a hard day’s work. The *sleep* after a good cry.

For those carrying *deep pain, fear, and grief* – and these days, with the looming Climate Apocalypse, that means all of us – the frantic merriment of Advent can overwhelm our senses, like a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. The rampant consumerism looks like fiddling while Rome burns.

But Advent originally sought to provide a kind of *'mini-Lent'* before Christmas, *a time of meditation, fasting, and spiritual growth*. Waiting. Preparation.

The birth narrative *symbols* – *a humble stable full of animals; marginalized shepherd families; refugees fleeing for their lives* – all seek to lift up a concept of power and divinity *completely at odds with the prevailing culture*. The symbol of the *'little Lord Jesus'* intentionally took the word *'Lord'* away from Caesar and put it in the midst of poverty and pain. Just the way the *slave songs* took the word *'Master'* away from the slaveholder and reclaimed it for the oppressed and dying.

The implications is that *true power, true divinity, dwells in our deepest places of pain*. Only *there* do we find the kind of *power*, the kind of *peace*, that no one can ever take from us. Only when *all Creation flows with wellness* can a Divine Vision be realized; but – *conversely* – in order to find divinity, we must *therefore* be willing to go into those *broken places*, seeking *healing*, seeking *justice*. And that can be *terrifying*.¹

But there is *more* for us to consider as we approach *Christmas*.

You see, those of us expecting the nostalgia and sentiment of the familiar Christmas story are *surprised* when we hear Matthew begin abruptly with, *"Now the birth of Jesus took place in this way."*

Where is the introduction to the homeless couple seeking shelter as the woman prepares to give birth? Where is the description of the stable, crude and bare, with cattle lowing and the baby Jesus lying on a bed of hay? Where are the shepherds in the field, the angels announcing the good news and singing God's praises?

If we read further in Matthew, we find the familiar story of the *wise men*, following the star and carrying gifts of *gold, frankincense and myrrh*. But the

¹ Tallessyn Zawn Grenfell-Lee, *Joy to the World*, December 21st, 2019

story of Jesus' birth is told from a very different perspective. *Luke* focuses on Mary—her encounter with the angel, her birthing and wrapping of Jesus in bands of cloth, her reflections on the events. But *Matthew's story* centers on *Joseph*.

Like another Joseph who was a dreamer, *Mary's Joseph* had a life-changing *dream* too. Instead of quietly ending his engagement to Mary when he learned of her unplanned and untimely pregnancy, Joseph went ahead with their marriage, and agreed to become the adopted father of her child. When the child was born, Joseph, still obeying his dream, named him Jesus, or "*Savior*."

Perhaps Matthew and Luke are not so different in terms of the message they are trying to convey. Each tells the story of an unplanned pregnancy and of the *fear* and *dismay* that initially accompanies the announcement of that pregnancy. Each tells the story of an *encounter* with an angel who offers encouragement by foretelling the mission of the child who will be born. Each tells the story of a *parent* accepting this astounding news in humble obedience to God.

The promise of a savior, of course, is astonishing news for the people who were desperate for a savior. In Isaiah, (for example) when King Ahaz was beset by foreign powers, he looked for an alliance with one of the foreign kings. But Isaiah counseled *trust not* in foreign governments but in God. Isaiah promised the birth of a child named Immanuel, "*God with us*." In Matthew's story, the child Immanuel is Jesus, *God with us*, the one who will save people from their sins.

Hope for a savior also echoes in Psalm 80: "*Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved*." In our times of trial, the cry of the psalmist rings in our hearts.

In our country, our sense of safety and security was shattered on September 11th, 2001. Rowan Williams, who was then the Anglican archbishop of Wales (and later the Archbishop of Canterbury), was a few blocks from the World Trade Center on September 11. As he recalls: "*I remember feeling, 'Now I know just a little of what it is like for so many human beings, Israelis and Palestinians now, and Iraqis a few years ago.'*" God shares the experience of terror and death and answers *not* in the language of hatred and rejection, but in giving us the Word made flesh, *God with us*.

You see, part of the astonishing *surprise* of the *announcement* of the Savior is how *inclusive* it is. *On the one hand*, Jesus is a Hebrew descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, a man of royal lineage descended from the renowned King David. *On the other hand*, the salvation incarnate in Jesus extends beyond the people of Israel to include the gentiles. This is *implicit* in the genealogy that introduces the narrative of Jesus' birth in Matthew's Gospel. The genealogy names *not only* Abraham and David *but also* Rahab and Ruth, gentiles who married into the Hebrew lineage. *Paul* highlights the inclusion of the gentiles in his Letter to the Romans, telling them that he was *sent* to the gentiles, including those in Rome.

For us, the distinction between Jew and gentile does not have the significance it had in the first-century world of scripture. *But what about contemporary distinctions created by national borders or racial and ethnic identity? What of the distinction between Christian and Muslim? Or other religious traditions? To whom is God's salvation extended?*

The narrative of Jesus' birth (unfortunately) does not provide a ready answer to such questions. But *perhaps* in the story of Jesus' unconventional birth (born of Mary yet conceived by the Holy Spirit), we get our first inkling of *miracle*—that in Jesus God comes to *all* of us. *Perhaps*, as we hear again the story of Jesus' unconventional birth, we may be *open* to God's salvation appearing in new and surprising places.²

Friends, the message of *Jesus's birth* is that God *knows* what it is like to be *weary and discouraged and scorned and homeless*. Indeed, God knows what it is like to be *caught up* in *political structures* over which one has no control. God knows what it is like to be *pushed* to the sidelines, *overlooked* when important decisions are made. In other words, Immanuel (God) cares about how life is lived *in* this world. God—*this story intimates*—cares a lot more about *compassion* and *justice* in the *public sphere* than about theological orthodoxy in the *private*. God cares about *human suffering* in the Middle East and the cities of America (and on our southern border) and in the lives of *respectable* but *quietly desperate* and *anxious* people.

² Ruth A. Meyers, *Christ For the World*, The Christian Century, December 5th, 2001

The most *important, radical, and hopeful* words in human history include these:
“*and they shall name him Immanuel,*’ which means, ‘*God is with us.*’”³

³ John M. Buchanan, *Fourth Sunday of Advent*, Preaching God’s Transforming Justice, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2013, p. 30