

BE NOT AFRAID
Isaiah 11:1-5; Matthew 1:18-25

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Churches are busy places at Christmas. It's as it should be. The church should be busy--it should be a place where people like to go. That's good. We have something special to say at Christmas. We have something called gospel, which means good news, and Lord knows people want to hear good news. And our news is as new and as good as can be--God has come to dwell among us, God has entered our very frail human life.

The text we read this morning is a news report. Matthew tells the story, with apologies to Johann Sebastian Bach, with very little passion. But it is news. A young woman named Mary is pregnant, hardly newsworthy. But, she is a virgin, chosen by God, to give birth to a child by the Holy Spirit. That's news, new news, as they say--everything about it is new--a young virgin, giving birth by the Holy Spirit, to a newborn child.

He is called Immanuel, which means God with us. God has entered our lives, in this most remarkable, newsworthy way. God, the one the creeds speak of as creator of heaven and earth, has now become a creature of heaven and earth. That's news. That's our news. And it is, we say, good news.

And it should be good news, even though the Herods of the world, the rulers of the world, don't hear it as good news. They'd rather kill it. That's what the story tells us. My favorite Christmas carol tells us that the hopes and fears of all the years are met in this one born in our midst. Hopes--and fears.

And so, with our news, perhaps seems to be fearful news. Even the prophet warns us of this one called Immanuel, God with us. He comes as a judge, says the prophet. And he will judge righteously, not by appearance, not by what he sees or hears. He'll judge us as we really are--at home, with our spouses, our children, our friends, with all of our thoughts, our pettiness, our jealousies, our angers, our resentments, our darkest secrets.

Of course, that's one way to see it. That's one way to see God in our midst--the righteous judge, ready to expose us in order to judge us, to reject us, to condemn us. But, maybe our news is different. It's Christmas. And, maybe Christmas has a different message, some different news, some new news.

Maybe Christmas means God wants to see us better. Maybe God wants to see us sympathetically, with understanding, knowing the nuances, the motives, all of the things that explain why we do what we do, or fail to do what we ought to have done. Maybe God has come into our lives to know us better, to understand us better.

To be understood may be one of life's greatest gifts. We fail, we do, you and I, we mess up. There is much we cannot undo, we cannot fix. More than anything, we want someone who understands us, who knows why we did what we did, or didn't do what we might have done.

In the midst of Joseph's dream the angel tells him that the child to be born is not only going to be God in our midst, Emmanuel. The angel also tells Joseph that the child will be given a name, Jesus, from the Hebrew Joshua, which means Savior, because he will save his people from their sins. Immanuel, God, with us, is also Jesus, Savior from our sins.

Whatever anyone says, we know sin, and we know it's real, even if we don't quite know what it is. I'm only partially misquoting Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart when I say, "Whether or not we can define sin, we know it when we see it."

What we don't know is what to do about it. We lecture about it, we decry it, we wring our hands over it, we worry over all of the devilish temptations that surround us and our children that lead us into it. We want to fix it.

What we don't do is forgive it. "He will save the people from their sins," says the angel to Joseph. But, we lord over the people their sins. We point out to the people their sins. We remind the people of their sins. We refuse to let people go of their sins. But, we don't save them from their sins. We don't forgive their sins.

We'd rather have Lent than Christmas. We'd rather have sackcloth and ashes and confessions. We'd rather have you come to us and admit your wrong doings. But, God would rather come into our human lives, understand our lives, and embrace us and forgive us.

If Christmas means nothing else, it means that God watched us as we continued to mess up our lives and decided that no amount of commandments, no amount of rules, no amount of scoldings would work. And so God decided to enter our lives, living among us, full of grace and truth, and forgive us.

I think it means something, maybe everything, that God would come to dwell among us as a newborn child in a real home with real parents. One can suppose that Mary and Joseph's home was a good one. They were devoutly religious, demonstrating remarkable faith in the face of the weight of raising a family in poverty as God's chosen ones.

And, I think we can be completely sure that they were completely human, just as the child to whom they gave birth was completely human. And yet, God chose to enter human life in just such a home that endured, as Dorothy Sayers puts it so beautifully, "pain and humiliation, defeat, despair, and death, ...and thought it all

well worthwhile." (*Creed and Chaos*) That's the Christmas story. God wasn't just one with us, God was one with us in all of our human and home filled realities.

We just hosted the Christmas tea. I say "we," even though we all know I was mainly an interested bystander. I had my role, I made sure we had a sufficient supply of tea, both kinds--red and white. But, of course, the bigger deal, maybe, was that one could see our home, get a glimpse of our life, something we were more than happy to share. It's rightly a Christmas type event, an incarnational event, where we get to share ourselves with each other, where maybe we see each other a little bit more as we are.

Ultimately, of course, only God sees us as we are, as we really are. And that's OK. No matter what we see in a home, we don't see it all. A counseling professor of ours once told of riding through a posh neighborhood near one of the wealthy Presbyterian churches where he was speaking. He commented on the beauty of the houses, many of which belonged to members of the church. The woman with whom he rode, a pastor of the church, said, "But if we could open up the roofs and look down in them I wonder what hurts we would see."

For one brief moment in time, the heavens opened up and looked down into a manger, and angels sang, and shepherds came to see, and wise ones journeyed following a star, and there they found what we too often find in our world, a refugee family, rejected by the powers around them, by rulers who could care less that they'd uprooted an entire family just so they could count them on their tax rolls and make sure they were legal.

But, there they were, seemingly nobodies, yet nobodies God had chosen. There, in that place, God came to live among us, in that family, as that child, seeing us, them, as we all are. God seeing us as we are, God with us, God come to save us as we are. That's the Christmas story.

Tonight we'll hear the Christmas story yet again. We'll hear it because we want to hear it. We'll hear it because we want to hear good news. We'll hear it because we want to know that everything is all right, that we don't need to fear, as the angel makes sure to tell Joseph.

Now the story as we will hear it this evening will be chaotic, which means all of the costumes and the noise and the excitement are completely appropriate. I'm not sure how in the midst of it all the poor baby sleeps, but as long as we use dolls and not real babies I think we'll be safe.

The story tonight will tell it from everyone's perspective--the wise ones, the shepherds, the animals, Mary, Joseph. Matthew's gospel is more than a little chauvinistic, more concerned with Joseph's fears than with Mary's. And trust me, I know better than to try to engender sympathy for poor Joseph when it is Mary

who is having to give birth to the Christ child in whom the hopes and fears of all the years are met. Guys, trust me on this.

But, the angels see fit to give Joseph a word of comfort, too. "Joseph, do not be afraid," says the angel. "Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife," says the angel. "Joseph, do not be afraid to be part of God's plan. Do not be afraid to step out on this venture with her. Do not be afraid to be part of God's good news." It's a scary venture, just as giving birth and raising a child in this scary world is a scary venture.

But that's what God did, and that's what you and I do when we decide to cast our lives and our lot with this child born in the manger, the child called Emmanuel, God with us, Jesus, come to save us from our sinful ways by forgiving our sinful ways, by accepting our sinful ways, by enduring the pain of the crosses that our sinful ways bring.

Joseph, do not be afraid. Mary, do not be afraid. Every single one of you, do not be afraid. God is there with us, with you, with me, to love, to accept, to keep us in this life and in the next. Be not afraid. And so Joseph did what you and I do in life. He accepted what God had given him, and he embraced it and he moved forward with it. "He took Mary as his wife, they had a son, he named him Jesus, Savior from our sins, Immanuel, God with us, good news."

Don't be afraid. God goes with you, with me, with us all, wherever we may go. Don't be afraid. Just know this, wherever we find ourselves, the God we know in Jesus is there. And, no matter where we find ourselves, our news never changes, our news is always gospel, our news is ever and always good news, news that tells us time and again, God is with us, with you, with me--be not afraid.

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