

“God with Us”
December 22, 2024

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

As our season of preparation and active waiting draws to a close in these last few days of Advent, we hear what we’ve all been waiting for—the story of the birth of Jesus. On Tuesday we’ll listen to the traditional Christmas Eve version of this story from the Gospel of Luke, complete with census and shepherds, angels and manger, and no room at the inn.

Matthew tells a simpler story. It is not as easily brought to life in a Christmas pageant—but as we listen carefully, it brings new life to our hearts.

This morning’s Gospel reading came from the final eight verses of chapter one of Matthew.

I didn’t read the first 17 verses because Matthew begins in a way that seems peculiar and perhaps boring to our modern sensibilities. Instead of Jesus we are given genealogy. Instead of birth we are given “begats.” In this list, we hear some familiar names: Abraham, David, Solomon. We also hear the *unfamiliar* names—Uzziah, Ahaz, and someone named Zerubbabel.

Surprisingly, Matthew also gives us something that most genealogies of the time do not—the names of several women who are the ancestors of Jesus: Tamar, and Rahab, and Ruth—Gentile women, and, as the note in my Bible says, “some of questionable repute.” Nancy Rockwell is more forthright in saying that “Each of the foremothers...could set tongues wagging with their bold defiance of sexual norms.” They might have been included to prepare the way for Mary, with her own marital dilemma.

Perhaps more likely, as the Jewish New Testament scholar, Amy Jill Levine, says, they are examples of “higher righteousness: Tamar acts in spite of Judah’s injustice; Rahab recognized the power of the Hebrew God and protects people; Ruth moves Boaz to action.

All of this leads to, as Matthew puts it, “Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born.”

Matthew tells us that the story of Jesus is a story that begins with Abraham and Sarah and if we want to understand what Jesus was about, we need to go back and understand what their lives were about.

God said to them: “Go...” Leave your home and your extended family and your country and everything you know and everything that makes sense to you and everything that had made you comfortable. “Go...” God said, adding a promise to bless Abraham and Sarah with a great nation and to be with them as their God.

Of course, God didn’t say, “And by the way, in a little while I’m going to ask Abraham to kill your only son...” which is how that story plays out. That that would have been too much for anyone.

Abraham and Sarah and their descendants had many adventures and, at Matthew’s genealogy tells it, after 14 generations—give or take a few, the great-grandson of Rahab, the grandson of

Ruth, Jesse, became the father of David, born in Bethlehem, as powerful and faithful and great a sinner to ever lead the nation of Israel.

After 14 more generations—again, give or take, the whole people—or at least those still alive after the siege of Jerusalem—were taken off into captivity and exile in Babylon, their nation and their temple and perhaps most of all their hopes all torn down.

Then, as another 14 generations were coming to completion, as the children of Abraham and Sarah lived under Roman occupation, under the Roman “peace” that extended over much of the known world, an unknown carpenter named Joseph in a little town is engaged to Mary when he finds out that she is pregnant.

This long story is a story of faith. It is a story of doubt. It’s a story of devastation and destruction. It’s a story of redemption and renewal. It is a story of God’s presence with women and men in lives that are made up of both faith and fear—as are all lives, including our own.

We came in on the story this morning as it continues with a dream.

In this dream, an angel—and remember, that’s a Greek word that means messenger—an angel, a messenger of God comes to Joseph and says what angels so often seem to say: “Do not be afraid...”

“Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

Matthew says that this is to *fulfill* the words that the prophet, Isaiah, spoke to one of Joseph’s ancestors, Ahaz, whose name is included in that opening genealogy. Ahaz, remember, was one of the worst kings the nation of Israel ever knew.

In a different context, Isaiah spoke of a young woman bearing a child. This birth would be a sign to King Ahaz, who was trembling before the approaching Syrian army, that God’s providence was always present and that God’s vindication was not far off.

Through the prophet, God would tell Ahaz:

“Take heed,
be quiet,
do not let your heart be faint.

Faithful Abraham and Sarah going with nothing but a promise.

Dreadful Ahaz encountering God in the promise of a child.

Now Joseph moving forward into an uncertain future with Mary.

All of them heard the same message from the same God: Do not be afraid.

At the end of Matthew's Gospel, the risen Christ gives Mary Magdalene and the other disciples the same command that God gives to Abraham and Sarah: "Go." And he gives them the same assurance that comes to them and Ahaz and Joseph: "Do not be afraid. I am with you always."

From Abraham in the first verse of chapter one to Mary Magdalene meeting the resurrected Christ at the end of the Gospel, Matthew tells all of us who hear this story today that the way of those who seek to follow God will be uncertain yet that way is certainly held in God's care.

So it is that we go in faith each day. This is not a blind faith that doesn't look first—even Jesus tells us to count the cost of any enterprise. But we step out in faith—trusting in our plans, in our families, our friends, our colleagues, our church, in ourselves.

We go, with faith in the God who still says, do not be afraid.

This, then, is "what Christmas is all about: the God who calls, the God who says, "Go," the God who says, "Do not be afraid," entered into history in a new way, bringing life when it is least expected, even bringing life out of death.

This is "what Christmas is all about: that God loves this world and is with us in all our days, even when the future is uncertain, even when we feel like a city besieged.

Speaking to Joseph, the angel did not say: "Oh, and by the way, the brutal and psychopathic King Herod will try to kill your son—and that will be just the beginning." That would have been too much for anyone.

We never know what the whole story will be, do we? Even when an angel speaks—even when *God* speaks—we're not told everything. Maybe we're only told enough to get our consent, enough so that we can *go* and not be too afraid. Maybe that's all that is needed. Probably we couldn't take any more. Really, would we *want* any more?

Along with some assurance, the angel does give Joseph one command: You are to name this child Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

In a strange way, these words are quite specific.

In a strange way, we have experienced them in our own lives.

We know, don't we? Jesus does not make everything go our way or cause our problems to vanish. Jesus does not save us from our mistakes or our foibles or our bad choices. Jesus does not save us from our wise decisions or our prudent courses of action—for they too can result in unseen and unwanted consequences. Jesus does not save us from prosperity or adversity. In some sense we must work out our salvation with fear and trembling.

But Jesus saves us from our sins.

That is, Jesus saves us from all that would separate us from God and from other human beings—and from all that separates us from our true selves: from rigid certainty, from self-righteousness, from self-deprecation, and from all of our whole hearted yet fruitless attempts to save ourselves. In this Jesus, God takes on human flesh and human life so that we might find the love and acceptance that underlies all existence—that is salvation, wholeness of life.

The child is born—Matthew doesn't say much more than that.

As I said, this doesn't make for a good Christmas pageant, at least not until those astrologers show up—and we'll hear about them on January 5. But Matthew is careful to tell us that Joseph named this child Jesus—a form of the Hebrew name Joshua which means “God saves.” Do you remember the story of Joshua? He isn't found in Matthew's genealogy, but Joshua was the successor to Moses' authority. In the story of Joshua, God's repeated refrain is: “I will be with you.”

This refrain is echoed in the name of the child that Isaiah spoke of to the frightened and horrible King Ahaz—Emmanuel—which means God with us.

The name is a reminder to people across the ages that we are not alone—God is with us, the Creator is with the creation, in ways that we would never have come up with on our own.

The God who is with us is a God who understands what it is to be human, and understanding, is also a God who forgives and calls us into the future.

You have not been forgotten by the God who gently breathes life into us so that we might hope for and dream of something beyond what we can now touch and see. We can find courage and perhaps even joy even in the worst of times—as we face death, violence, and the despair that clings to our hearts—for God is with us.

Beyond the shepherds and angels and star and magi, the story of Christmas is the story of men and women who find the courage to move in new directions and find that even in strange, unfamiliar places, God is with them, to strengthen and to save.

In faith, we go with them.

We have made this story our story. We tell it anew each year so that in the days between the telling we might draw from it the faith and strength and hope we need for living.

We tell it anew each year because each year we come to it as new people transformed by where we have been, what we have attempted, how we have loved.

In this familiar yet new story, in our fearful and faithful lives, we find Emmanuel—God with us—in surprising and unexpected ways.