

“God’s Answer is Emmanuel!”

Steve Ramer
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Scriptures

Matthew 1:18-25

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place as follows: While his mother Mary was engaged to Joseph, but before they had slept together, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit.

19 Since Joseph, her fiancée was a good man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he planned to break off their engagement quietly.

20 But while he was thinking about this, a messenger of the Lord surprised him in a dream and said, "Joseph, descendant of David, don't hesitate to take Mary as your wife, since it is the Holy Spirit who is responsible for her pregnancy. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus, which means, 'he will save his people from their sins.'" 22 All of this has happened so the prediction of the Lord given by the prophet would come true:

23 "Look, a virgin will conceive a child, and she will give birth to a son they will name him Emmanuel" (which means, "God with us").

24 Joseph woke from his dream, got up and did what the messenger of the Lord told him to do: he took Mary as his wife, 25 but did not sleep with her until she had given birth to a son. And Joseph named him Jesus.

Sermon

The jig is up! Mary's little secret has been found out. Well... maybe not publicly, but at least her fiancé knows. Cousin Elizabeth was the only one she told... So, was she the one who spilled the beans?

Makes you wonder who else she might have told? Soon everyone will know... but of course eventually everyone will know since a pregnancy isn't something you can easily hide. And the consequences were pretty severe. Adultery in those days could mean death.

You may recall that Jesus was once confronted by an angry mob of very religiously inspired folks ready to stone a certain woman that they had caught committing that same crime.

With her conviction sealed they had even brought their stones

as they approached to test Jesus, you know to see if he too was “man enough” to initiate the ultimate penalty.

The fact that Joseph decided to cut off the engagement quietly, without publicly charging her was quite generous, even noble - he was a highly enlightened man for his generation.

Indeed, as Matthew says, he was a “good man.”
But his intentions were not the only reason he was a good man, but I will need to pick up on that later.

We have intentionally posed, what should be a troubling question to you all this advent season.
“What are you waiting for?”

It may seem a bit harsh, maybe too critical
and even too brutally honest for us to demand of God?
But it is also likely the desperate plea we also wish for under our breath?

God, you ask us to wait, to hold on to your many promises,
but for how long? What is taking you so long?

The question also stings as we blurt it out, since we also
and immediately realize that the question also applies to us.
What am I waiting for? What has to happen before I’m willing
to get off my duff and do some stuff?

At Christmas God promises that all warfare will cease,
the poor and the oppressed will receive justice
and that creation will return to the harmony of Eden.

“So, what are you waiting for God?”

Well, I guess you could say, that finally on our fourth Sunday of Advent
and the last Sunday before Christmas, God answers.
But I must caution you because it may not be
the answer that you were really hoping for?

For you see in our great anticipation of God’s answer
we might be tempted by false hopes and unrealistic expectations.
Hope does burn eternal but after a while it can also give in to pipe dreams.
But God’s ultimate answer may prove a bit perplexing
if not down right disappointing.

"Look, a virgin will conceive a child, and she will give birth to a son they will name him Emmanuel."

Really? A baby... are you serious?
Cute and cuddly for sure, but totally defenseless.
God, if you hadn't noticed we live in a exceedingly troubled times,
of war, hunger, inequality and environmental disaster
and you send us a baby?!

It'll be decades before he's ready to straighten things out
(provided of course he lives that long).
We need a hero! Someone straight out of Marvel comics!
Maybe a righteous, warrior king with six pack abs,
thick flowing hair and a winning smile.
Somebody who can kick some serious ass!
And yet you insist on sending us a babe born to a young girl?

But, on second thought, maybe a baby is just what we need?
And according to Matthew this ain't no ordinary baby.
Matthew seems to be saying that this baby encapsulates
two very critical realities which his names will remind us of
every time we say them; Jesus and Emmanuel.

"Jesus," according to Matthew, means, "he will save his people
from their sins," while "Emmanuel" means, "God with us."

Now when I talk about sin, I often like to use two related terms,
redemption and reconciliation, to explain God's salvation.

Sin is anything that can get in the way of our relationship with God.

And an example of redemption, that I use often
and maybe a bit dated for some goes like this..
when I was little I would collect empty pop bottles
that I would find abandoned along roadside ditches.
I would then take them to the local grocery store
where I "redeemed" them for a nickel.
Those bottles would then go off to some factory to be sanitized
and refilled with their respective elixirs
and hopefully be reused again and again.

Reconciliation is a bit easier to understand.
A broken relationship is restored and whatever it was
that kept folks separated has been removed.

I know that those who struggle with and seek help with their addictions likely understand redemption in a very powerful way. God, they've told me, literally picked them up out of the ditch, cleaned out the all the gunk (yes gunk too is a theological term!) inside them and has now filled them again with new life and new purpose.

Each day that reconciliation, their relationship with God, the hope, is simply one more day of sobriety!

That is what, for some, is really good news in real time. But this baby is also really good news for us all! Our mistakes, our screw ups and even our destructive behaviors are forgiven, washed away and sanitized and best of all there's not a thing that you or I can do to change that.

It's done, the transaction is completed, the nickel is paid and the cleansing underway to get us back on the shelf. All we gotta do is let it happen. Now it may happen instantly or it may take a number of years, years of struggle and repeated attempts, but it can happen.

Reconciliation, however, is a bit more complicated because it is reactive and takes both acceptance and action. We must first accept the fact that we are forgivable and also forgiven. Asking and seeking forgiveness is of course the best place to start.

But we also know that the failure to forgive ourselves and others is poisonous, leading to anger, resentment and separation. None of these are healthy for us physically, emotionally or spiritually! But, hallelujah, this baby is also named Emmanuel!

"God with us." But let me be clear, this is not God on my side and therefore not at all on yours.

God comes to be with us, to take part fully in our world, to share fully in our lives; all the ups and downs and even all of the downs and the outs. God is with us in both the pain and in the healing, as well as in both the joy and the sorrow.

And, not so coincidentally, God is also with us when we have to wait. We don't even need to wait till Christmas for God's presence to be with us because God is always right here and right now!

In a world of so much hurry and instant gratification,
God is really the only thing that is instant and immediate!

Our growth into new creatures may take some time -
most likely an entire lifetime - but we never, ever,
need to wait on the Divine who always desires to be with us.
And all that waiting that we end up doing each and every day;
for the train to pass, or in the line at the supermarket,
or for some relative's plane to land are moments that can also be redeemed,
because in those moments and in every moment, God is with us!

All the insults that are daily inflicted upon us by coworkers,
or family members, or even our so called friends
and especially those folks who don't like us - enemies -
each and every one of those painful experiences can be transformed into
wondrous opportunities for forgiveness, reconciliation and growth.

But back to Joseph for a minute before I close.
See, I remembered and you probably thought I forgot, didn't ya?
His role in this story I think can give us some insight on how we
should conduct ourselves while we are waiting.

Matthew called him a "good man," but he was good, not because
of his good intentions, but precisely because of what he did.
And he did two very important things!

As I said earlier, sending Mary away quietly was certainly
a much kinder option for her crime of infidelity.
But it was also a very patriarchal and patronizing thing for him to do.
He could have done it and be done with her and the baby
and there would not have been anything that she
could have done about it!

His second action was more, I think, far more important.
He obeyed the voice of God's messenger by following through
with his earlier commitment and married Mary!
You could say that he simply did the right thing!
But we all know that doing the right thing doesn't always happen.
The right thing can be risky and get us into trouble.
Joseph did risk being shamed by his culture, expelled by his religion
and misunderstood by his family and friends.

He certainly had lots of really good reasons to not follow through,
but he did it anyway.

Now don't get me wrong, Mary's receptivity to God's plan was certainly far more risky and far more dangerous.

But God's plan often incorporates lots of fairly ordinary folks, merely doing the right things, in order to make it all work out!

The baby has not even been born yet and he has already managed to radically change some of God's key players in this drama. A lowly peasant girl understands and her voice proclaims the truth that God dearly loves the poor and demands justice for the oppressed! And she can body sing it because she has experienced it! Joseph too has experienced God's truth and it has set him free to go against his times and his culture by empowering him to do the right thing.

"Come, oh come, Emmanuel!"

And ransom those who are still captives of sin!

Captivated by false gods, incorrect answers, wrong assumptions, laziness and misunderstood expectations.

"Come, oh come, Emmanuel!"

May your love pick us up, wash us clean (both inside and out) in order to be used again and again by you.

"Come, oh come, Emmanuel!"

May your forgiveness release us from our guilt and grief in order that we may forgive ourselves and others.

"Come, oh come, Emmanuel!"

For because of Emmanuel, we are constantly reminded that we are never alone!

Hallelujah, Emmanuel, we are no longer able to be separated from God!

Hallelujah, Emmanuel, God is here, now!

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