

Natalie W. Bell
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 Fourth Advent

Emmanuel
Matthew 1:18-25

*Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah^[i] took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to **divorce her** quietly. ²⁰ 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**. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to **name him Jesus**, for he will **save his people from their sins**.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³ “Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall **name him Emmanuel**,” which means, “**God is with us**.” ²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had given birth to a son,^[k] and **he named him Jesus**.*

On this fourth and final Sunday of Advent,
 we remember God’s LOVE.
 And we remember how we see that **love in the life of Joseph**—
 his love for Mary, his love for God,
 and his love for a newborn son named Jesus.

The scriptures tell us that Joseph was a **righteous man**.
 But strangely, we never hear him speak in the story! Not once!
 Why would his words not be recorded?
 Maybe it was because Matthew wants us to know
 that Joseph’s **ACTIONS speak louder than any words ever could**.
 His faith and righteousness are revealed through what he **does**, not what he **says**.

The context of our passage today is the **geneology** of Jesus in Matthew 1:1-17,
 where Jesus is traced back through the line of David, and back to Abraham.
 But oddly, the geneology lists **four women**,
 Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba—
 all women with sordid pasts!

Tamar acted as a prostitute,
Rahab was a prostitute who helped Joshua escape,
Ruth was a foreigner, a Moabite,
 and **Bathsheba** committed adultery with David!

So Matthew wants us to know that Jesus is the *fulfillment* of God's promises,
 a King from the line of David,
 but he *ALSO is Savior of all people, even women,*
even those outside the people of Israel!

Matthew cares about history.

Ten times Matthew connects Jesus to prophecies
 From the Hebrew Bible,
 and in today's passage he quotes from *Isaiah 7:14*
 to explain the name of Jesus, *Emmanuel*.

When we think of Joseph,
 Matthew wants us to think of the *ancestors of our faith*,
 like **Abraham** who was promised a son in his old age through angelic visitors,
 and **Zechariah** who was promised a son in his old age
 and because he didn't believe, he was mute until John the Baptist was born!
 Joseph comes from a long line of faithfulness.

Mary usually takes center stage in the nativity story, for good reason,
 but *Joseph was also instrumental*
 in making sure all of this took place.

After hearing about her pregnancy,
 Joseph decides to *divorce Mary quietly*,
 to avoid her the public humiliation and a possible stoning.

But then he has a *dream*
 (actually the first of multiple dreams he will have in the birth story)
 telling him to take Mary as his wife, without relations,
 and to name the child Jesus,
 who will also be known as Emmanuel.

Incredibly, he *follows this dream* from God—
 and sets out on a path of *courage and faithfulness!*
 His actions also change the course of history!

And isn't Joseph such an *example for us?*
 With his *faith? His bravery?*
 especially at Christmastime?

This week I read a great quote,
Christmas has always been difficult, just ask Joseph.
 Think of all he was asked to do, all that he DID do!
 He said yes to God, just as Mary did—
 and he surely suffered because of his choices.
Nothing he did was easy, or even made sense!

His story is a reminder that Christmas is a time of *joy mixed with sorrow.*
 And no one's life is perfect, not even close.
 It's just because we are surrounded by so many 'perfect' images,
 That we live with sadness and pain at Christmas.
 But the truth is, *all families are broken and a mess,*
 And we all suffer especially at this time of year.
 (This is why our *Blue Christmas service* is so special).

The nativity story can make us feel better
 When we realize that *families have always been complicated,* even the Holy
 Family...just imagine Joseph bringing Mary home for dinner, his pregnant fiancé!
 And then trying to explain how the child is not his,
 but it's not any other man's child either!
 Talk about awkward conversation around the table!

So, the question is, *HOW was Joseph able to do all of this?*
 And what does his *story mean for us today?*

How was Joseph able to follow God's call in that dream?
 How was he able to do all that was asked of him—
 to marry his fiancé, despite ridicule,
 to take the child as his own,
 to name him Jesus.

Maybe the answer is found in the *Isaiah 7:14 passage*
 that is quoted in our story today:
All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ “*Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,*”
which means, “*God is with us.*”

What if THAT is the answer?
What if *Emmanuel is the source of his strength?*
The source of *OUR strength* today?

What if that’s the KEY to *us getting through Christmas?*
The key to us saying yes to God?
The power for us to *do the hard things* we encounter?
What if Emmanuel is *OUR courage, our strength?*

This child was not only to be named *Jesus*, which means *God saves*,
but he was to be known as *Emmanuel*, which means *God with us*.
Those names are powerful---*God Saves, and God With Us*.

They are *more than names*, for they reveal
That the God who gives Joseph the strength, mercy and grace to do difficult things
is the newborn baby Mary is bringing into the world.
It is Emmanuel—the God who is always with us.
With you and I, today. Right now. And always.

This *carpenter* with *a wild call from God*
is now called to repair relationships,
between himself and Mary,
but more importantly, between *God and all of us!*
For the son to be born is the *Savior of the world*,
coming to save us from sin and reconcile us to God!

Can you imagine what Joseph’s faithfulness required?

What happened as a result?
He was surely exposed to *ridicule and humiliation* for his choices!
His family probably doubted his explanation of events,
his friends may have abandoned him.
This once righteous man was likely considered *foolish at best*.

But Joseph chose to *bring hope, and peace*.
The *Savior gave him that strength*.
Mary was afraid of being divorced, humiliated, even stoned to death.

And suddenly after his dream,
Joseph was welcoming her as his wife, and the child as his own!
 Think of what he did.

In Season 1, episode 3 of the BBC series “*Call the Midwife*”,
 a baby is born, but the newborn baby’s skin color
 does ***not match the mother, or father....***
 making it clear that the child was born from an ***extramarital relationship***.

But the new father sees that baby, and knowing he is not his own,
 he doesn’t skip a beat.
 He immediately declares the baby to be the ***most beautiful baby ever***.
 He picks him up and glows with pride.
 He ***welcomes*** him into the family with love and,
 and shows ***honor and grace*** to the mother.
 Lauren Winner, Connections, Year A, Vol 1, pg. 63

I can think of ***other modern Josephs***,
 men and women who have welcomed children not their own, as their own.
 I’ve seen it in my own extended family.
 It’s such a powerful message of ***love and grace***, isn’t it?

Joseph’s faithfulness is a reminder to us,
 that ***following Jesus impacts our daily life***.
 Following God ***affects every choice*** we make, right?
 It makes a ***difference*** in what we say, and what we do.

Really ***everything in our lives is and should be shaped by our faith***—
 our families, our work, our politics, our relationships, our decisions.
What’s true for Joseph is true for us today.

And we are able to do that, ***because of Jesus***.
Emmanuel—God with us.
 God is the one who gives us the ***strength and courage*** we need,
 To do the hard things in life.

You know, ***Matthew ends his Gospel*** the way it began.
 In Matthew 1 we hear his name, Emmanuel, which means God with us.
 And in Matthew 28:20 Jesus says to his followers,
 for remember ***I am with you*** always, to the end of the age.

Joseph is able to be our example

because of the ***baby*** he accepted into his heart and home,
the baby who is our Savior--***Emmanuel***, God with us.

So this Christmas, ***how is Emmanuel God with YOU?***

What's your latest ***God-sighting?***

What ***gifts and blessings*** have you received?

Can you think of what God has been up to—***in your life?***

This year some of my God-sightings include

new friends and colleagues in ministry, and the joy of spending time with them.

It's the opportunity to be in Oklahoma after Christmas,
when we couldn't go last year because of Covid.

What about you?

And how can ***we follow in the footsteps of Joseph?***

How can we ***do the hard things in life, with the help of Emmanuel?***

Rev. Scott Hoezee, at the *Center for Excellence in Preaching*,
wrote the most beautiful statement about the ***name Emmanuel:***

Apparently, you cannot speak the one without invoking the other.

Jesus = Immanuel.

Jesus = God with us.

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

God with us in diapers....

*Christ among the barn animals and then those quirky magi astrologers and then
all the rest of the Gospel's curious cast of characters.*

God with us.

*God with the prostitutes and the lepers and the outcast in whose company Jesus
would delight again and again.*

God at the dinner table with a chive stuck between his incisors.

God lifting the cup of wine to his lips.

God with us.

God with the little children whose warm brows he touched and blessed.

God smiling when a baby was shown to him by a proud new mother.

God with us in all our ordinary times and days.

God with us, ... even unto the end of the ages.

Always. With us. Immanuel.

Immanuel is God-with-us in the cancer clinic and at the local nursing home where bodies slump pitifully in wheelchairs pushed up against the hallway walls.

Immanuel is God-with-us in the Hospice room and when life's final breath slips past a dear one's teeth and lips.

Immanuel is God-with-us when the pink slip comes and when the beloved child sneers, "I hate you!"

Immanuel is God-with-us when you pack the Christmas decorations away and, with an aching heart, you realize afresh that your one son never did call over the holidays. Not once.

Immanuel is God-with-us when your dear wife or mother stares at you with an Alzheimer's glaze and absently asks, "What was your name again, dear?"

Ever and always Jesus stares straight into you with his two good eyes and he does so not only when you can smile back

*but most certainly also when your **own eyes are full of tears.***

*In fact, Jesus is Immanuel, "God with you" even in those times when you are so **angry with God** that you refuse to meet his eyes.*

But even when you feel like you can't look at him, he never looks away from you.

He can't.

*His **name says it all.***

<https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2019-12-16/matthew-118-25-2>

Friends, that is our **Good News today.**

Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us.

Right now--at Christmas, and at all times.

That is the **promise** we stand on as we await Jesus' birth, and his coming again.

It is **our strength, our courage, our hope.**

And for Emmanuel, all God's people can say together, Amen.