

“EMMANUEL: GOD IS WITH US”

a sermon on Isaiah 7:10-16, Romans 1:1-7, and Matthew 1:18-25
December 18, 2016 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
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Last week, we considered the birth of Christ, which we are preparing to celebrate, as what we might call “sacred drama” – the salvation *story* into which the Gospel writer Luke, in particular, entices us to enter through his poignant stories of shepherds in the field, angels from heaven, and the humble birth of our Lord in a stable “because there was no room for them in the inn.”

But the nativity of our Lord is a more complex tableau than *just* Luke’s account. And so this morning I want to take you into *Matthew’s* world, and consider the Christ event, and our Lord’s nativity in particular, from that writer’s *perspective*.

Were Matthew’s account our *only* “Christmas story,” our Christmas pageants would be very, very different.

Let’s start at the beginning. Matthew’s Gospel opens by tracing Jesus’ genealogy – starting with Abraham, and highlighting the fact that Jesus was a direct descendant of Israel’s great king, David.

And in the story of the birth itself, there is nothing about a journey to *Bethlehem*. We are simply told that he was born there, and would otherwise assume that Bethlehem was Mary and Joseph’s *home*.

Rather, it is the “holy family’s” eventual move to *Nazareth* (well *after* Jesus’ birth) that is told in the form of a journey – and it is a journey entwined with political entanglements . . . not to mention the brutal mass murder of children at the hands of King Herod.

So the first point I want to make about Matthew’s version of the sacred drama is that it actually reads much like a continuation of the books of Samuel and Kings, telling the story of the next ruler in the line of David who will sit on the throne, replete with the politics of the *current* King learning of the birth of the new contender, and doing everything in his power to keep it from happening.

Let me pause, at this point, and go back in time to the days of the divided monarchy in Israel, and specifically to the reign of King Ahaz in the Eighth Century BC.

In those days, when Ahaz was King of Judah (the “Southern Kingdom”), *Israel* (the “Northern Kingdom”) had formed an alliance with *Syria* – its northern neighbor – with the intent of overtaking Judah, and doing away with it forever.

That is the original setting of Isaiah’s prophecy which is our Old Testament reading for the morning. Isaiah presents Ahaz with both good news and bad news. The good news is that Judah will prevail in the upcoming battle. “It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass. . .” But on the other hand, he says that “a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.”

In other words, Judah will win this battle, but you, Ahaz, will not survive it as Judah’s King. The kingship will pass to another, who God has already chosen – which is, in fact, precisely what came to pass. And that, in turn, led to Isaiah’s veneration as one of Judah’s great prophets.

I said last week that we have to be careful about how we read the prophets and their predictions. Well, when it comes to this one, what we have to be careful about is how we deal with it in light of the fact that it *was* predictive of the future, and it *did* come to pass, and yet Matthew – and for that matter, most of the other writers of the New Testament, think it is perfectly ok to allow this and other such “predictions” to *also* be about Jesus.

In that regard, we have to encounter some of the prophets *in light of other* prophets. The *later* prophets were the ones who spoke about God’s *radical* cosmic intervention that would be necessary to “set things right.” But Isaiah, who we so often read in both the Advent/Christmas and also the Lent/Easter cycles, was *clearly* speaking to his own audience, in his own day, about their *current* circumstances, and made some predictions that quickly came to pass.

And so we need to hear Isaiah’s words through the lens of the prophets who came *later*, and said that the arrival of God’s “messiah” would be a radical turn of events. But then at the same time, we need to hear that the messiah God raised up in Isaiah’s time came into the very *midst* of the current social and political realities of his day.

Because when it comes right down to it, *so did Jesus*.

And that brings us to the second major point about *Matthew’s* perspective. Matthew is the Gospel writer who, far more than the others, fills us in about those social and political realities in Jesus’ day – and reminds us over and over again that

what God is *doing in the world* in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is all taking place “to fulfill what was written by the prophets . . .” And that in Jesus’ day as in the days of old, those fulfillments happened in the context of the social realities of the day – God’s “radical transformation” began *in the days of King Herod*.

So in Matthew’s account, where what we know about Jesus’ parents is only that they are a family from the line of King David, we learn that Herod is scared to *death* when he hears the news that a “royal birth” has occurred, and he resolves, as was often done in ancient days, to ensure the continuation of his *own* line by killing off his potential challengers, leading to the holy family’s journey – first down to Egypt, and then eventually (after Herod’s death) to Nazareth, where they will raise their family.

And I think that story of not only God’s *involvement* or *intervention* in human history, but also of God’s making use of *existing* social and political structures in human history beckons us to consider our present moment in time, and how God might be involved – or encouraging *us* to be involved – in what God is doing in the world today.

If Advent means anything at all, it means that in our “waiting” we are “watching,” and watching means looking for signs of God presence. We are living in fascinating political times. Challenging times, to be sure. *Scary* times. But now, as in days of old, we have the opportunity to discern how and where God is present and at work in our world – in and through its existing structures, and institutions, and leaders – bringing about the radical transformation of the world foretold by the prophets.

That is perhaps the most astonishing claim of our Christian faith. That what *appears* to be the regular and ordinary, is *in fact* the extraordinary. A piece of bread, and a sip of juice, are in fact the cosmic banquet demonstrating the communion of God’s people. A child’s birth in a tiny and unimportant corner of the Roman Empire proclaimed as “Emmanuel: God is With Us.”

Let us be the people who can *find* the extraordinary in the ordinary – who can look at plain, normal, ordinary things, and see eternity. See God. See God *at work* in our midst.

To God be the glory.