

## God With Us

Advent A4- love

Isa 7: 10-19, Mt 1: 18-25

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### *Isa 7: 10-19*

Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. Then Isaiah said: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time 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. The LORD will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria.”

### *Mt 1: 18-25*

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah\* took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel’, which means, ‘God is with us.’ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son;\* and he named him Jesus.

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**Voice One:** Psst, come here. Do you want to know something? See that stable over there, the one with the donkey just in front of it? Do you know what is about to happen in there? A woman who isn't even married, is about to have a baby in there. Yep, right in there with the noisy cows and the stinking donkeys she will have a baby. She'll probably have to use a feeding trough for a crib. Can you believe it? Seems she and her fiancé came here for the Census Registration and couldn't find any other place to stay. Certainly can't blame everyone for turning those two kids away. They're nothing but trouble, having a baby like that. Their families must be horrified!

**Voice Two:** I saw the baby's father in the Registration line this morning, and are you ready for this? He said that an angel told him months ago that the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and they were to name him Immanuel, Jesus and that he will save people from their sins! That's the craziest story I ever heard someone make up just to deny being an unwed father. Can you believe it? You're right they're nothing but trouble, that's for sure.

Voice Three: Ha! Wait til you hear this part! I just overheard some other people talking and they think that this might be what Isaiah prophesied so long ago to King Ahaz when the Lord offered a reassuring sign of hope to the house of David. A young woman would bear a son Immanuel, God-with-us who would save the people from warfare and military threat. Can you believe it?

Trouble. Scandal. Unacceptable behavior. Inappropriate conduct. Breaking social rules and expectations. Taboo.

These are not the words we usually use to describe the Christmas story, ways of telling the story of the birth of Jesus. We tell the story with glorious angels in Halleluiah choruses and trumpet fanfare, with gentle, pastoral shepherds tending their flocks of sheep before they visit the newborn King, with Mary and Joseph following a divine mandate for the good of the whole world. It is such a familiar part of our lives that we hear but do not think deeply about just what it is that we have heard for so long, and so often. In the familiarity we have lost the experience of risk, of challenge, of scandal, that Mary and Joseph encountered and endured for God, for faith, for love, for the Child.

We know that Mary was a young woman engaged to Joseph, a local carpenter. Her father and perhaps an older brother would have arranged the marriage. Most likely Mary and Joseph met for the first time at the formal act of engagement when he placed a ring on her finger. During the year between the engagement and the wedding, a time when the couple were apart from one another but held in all the legal bonds of marriage, Mary and Joseph each encountered the most amazing and sacred calls upon their lives.

Mary was called God's favored and chosen one to conceive and bear a son through the Holy Spirit. In the Magnificat in the Gospel of Luke we hear Mary's joy upon learning that she was carrying God's child.

But there is more here that we overlook, and in doing so, we eclipse the hardship and scandal that Mary endured as her faith trumped cultural norms and social expectations. Mary, living at home with her family, and who has not seen Joseph for awhile is pregnant. This is scandal. This is forbidden. Legally regarded as the wife of her husband, unfaithfulness on her part is punishable by death. Joseph is clearly not the father of her child, and her only explanation is a most implausible, unbelievable story. Pregnant with the son of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. Who would believe that?

For Joseph the discovery that his bride was pregnant with a child not his own was an embarrassing and scandalous experience. He had the legal right to have her killed, to have her stoned for adultery. We do not know if Joseph ever considered that choice, but we do know that he planned to quietly divorce and dismiss her until an angel intervened to tell him that Mary's child was conceived by the Holy Spirit. God left Joseph with the dilemma of what to do when a lifetime of fidelity to God is suddenly rewarded with seeming disaster. The angel who appeared to Joseph in his dream explained the situation with this holy child who would save his people from their sins. The angel even takes care of the all-important naming process, telling Joseph to call the baby Jesus. This is a tall order for a man in a patriarchal, honor/shame culture. His love

and his strength of character are clear. Joseph proved himself not only to be an honorable man but also an obedient Jew. He was willing to walk a much more difficult path and step far outside cultural boundaries in order to follow God's will and intent for his life. Joseph accepted this--- in what way and after how long we do not know---but we know that he traded in his personal and paternal rites as the father of a son for a divine truth that mattered more than legalities and expected behavior. Pregnant with the son of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. Who would believe that?

As the time of birth is imminent, the expectant parents are surrounded by a city of people, yet they are alone. In the stable God the Father is also going to be God the Midwife guiding the newborn Jesus safely into the world.

There is still another scandal here, a scandal that the Christian world does not yet fully recognize. God has become a human being so connected to the whole experience of being fully human that God is a completely helpless newborn infant. God is totally, utterly, dependent upon two human beings to care for every need, for food, for safety, for warmth, for a parent's love. The Source of all life, the Creator of all life, is dependent upon two created human beings for everything in his life. The Creator identifies with the powerless, the poor, the oppressed and the homeless because this child is one of them. The glory of God is sleeping in a feeding trough. The glory of God is dressed in rags. The glory of God, in the eyes of society, is an illegitimate child. The glory of God is hope and humility. Who would believe that?

What does it mean then when we celebrate Christmas? When we celebrate the birth of Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us? It means that we are scandalized by the oppression, the injustice, the hunger, the poverty and the homelessness that continue to affect our world. It means that we, as God's created beings, are given a divine mandate to love and care for those who are vulnerable, dependent and weak. It means that we are given a sacred calling to act in love, hope and humility, to risk and to dare to put faith and love above the easier comforts of societal norms and expected conduct. It means that we seek, that we find, God in the most unexpected places. Can you believe it? Amen.

