

“How Is God *with* us?”

Isaiah 7.10–16 & Matthew 1.18–25

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Whenever I read this passage from Isaiah, I always think of the alto recitative from Händel's *Messiah*: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called ‘Immanuel’ – God, with us.” It is, of course, Isaiah's prophecy, so what do you think it could have meant to Isaiah (this is the early Isaiah: Isaiah of Jerusalem, by the way) to say that God would provide a sign of divine presence through a young woman who would bear a child, and the name of the child would be “Immanuel?”

Ahaz was the king of Judah (this was the time when the kingdom was divided between Israel and Judah), and he had just fended off an attack by the Aramites, and King Rezin was plotting against King Ahaz, which Isaiah reveals to the king. That's the prelude to this morning's lesson. (The postlude is that Isaiah is supposed to name *his* next-born son “Maher-shalal-hash-baz,” and I'll be Jesus was glad he was referred to as Immanuel instead!)

So, what did it mean to Ahaz and Isaiah that a young woman would bear a child called “God with us?” (It's a good thing Isaiah didn't prophesy *when* this was going to happen, because it took 700 years, assuming Jesus is whom Isaiah foretold.)

First, it's significant that while the King James Version translates “*almah*” as “*virgin*,” and the primary Hebrew meaning is young woman. (Just as the German word for young woman or virgin is *Jungfrau*.) So, Isaiah might not have been saying that it was a virgin who would conceive, but a young woman. Yet, it's also important to notice the recurring motif of God intervening in conception in the Hebrew Bible. Just think about Abraham & Sarah having Isaac or Zechariah and Elizabeth bearing John the Baptist in old age. It may be that Isaiah was prophesying the birth of Hezekiah to Ahaz's wife.

All of this is to say, we really don't know precisely what Isaiah's intent was. We do know, however, that some early Christians, like the writer of Matthew's gospel, connected Isaiah's prophecy with the birth of Jesus. Matthew's gospel says clearly that Joseph gave the boy the name Yeshua, which means “God saves,” not Immanuel, “God is with us.” But, “Immanuel” is a virtually a title Christians have given to Jesus, because we sense his uniquely intimate relationship with God, whether it's as God's son, as a person of the Trinity, or a human imbued with the wisdom of God and in close relationship to the Spirit.

One of the ways John Dominic Crossan, another Catholic scholar frames the question is by asking, Is this history *prophesied*, or is it prophecy *historicized*? I'll leave that to you to grapple with.



One of the key questions that comes up for a lot of people at this time of year is “Did the conception by the Holy Spirit really happen?” And that is the crux of the mystery of the incarnation, God coming into human form. You and I will never know whether Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit or by Joseph, but does it really matter? Do we need further evidence from God that Jesus was unique? Isn't it enough to use what we know about Jesus to assert that he was the messiah? (I'm reminded of that line from *Jesus Christ Superstar*, when Herod says sarcastically, “Do me a miracle, Jesus!”) Are we so faithless that we put God to the test to prove it to us?

Mystery is hard for most Protestants, especially for the heady variety. And it's even more so in the Congregational tradition, which was birthed in the Age of Reason. We want to know the answers, rather than admitting that some questions are not answerable, at least in an empirical way. Is Jesus divine? Did the virgin birth happen the way Matthew tells it? When we celebrate communion, how is Jesus present? Are the bread and wine literally the

body and blood? Is Jesus' real spiritual presence with us at the table? Or is it a deeply symbolic way to remember Christ? Did Jesus have a bodily resurrection like John's gospel describes, or was his resurrection a spiritual one, as Paul describes?

If we want to talk about mystery of God's presence with us, it's important to discuss personal experience as well as the far-off mystery of the incarnation. Have you yourself ever had an experience of the risen Christ? You may be surprised to hear me pose that question.

Here's a brief diversion: have you ever noticed in Charles Dickens's "A Christmas Carol," that Jesus is never mentioned by name? On those grounds, you might think it a secular story. But, I'd argue that the risen Christ shows up three times, albeit in the guises of Christmas Past, Present, and Future. Think about that the next time you see or read that wonderful story: that Ebenezer Scrooge has a very personal experience of Immanuel, "God with us," which changes his life forever.

It's useful to talk about two theological terms at this point: *immanence* (the sense that God is right here, immediately present to us, as close as our breath) and *transcendence* (the idea that God is the far off, removed, grand creator of the universe). Experiences of "God with us," like Scrooge's visit from the three spirits, tend to immanent, rather than transcendent.

Bruce MacKenzie, minister emeritus at First Congregational UCC in Boulder, spent a couple of months at the Monastery of Christ in the Desert, down in New Mexico. And in a conversation with one of the brothers, they began to talk about experiences of the risen Christ. It's important to note that this brother had already spent 40 years in prayerful monastic life. The monk said that long ago, he had sensed Christ's presence with him in a very tangible way, and that he hoped some day to feel that presence again. If it took that Benedictine monk so long in daily contemplation so long to have such an experience, why do we expect to sense the same amazing presence while being far less attentive?

None of us is able to order an experience of Christ's presence. It isn't something you'll find on Amazon.com or ask for at Starbucks: "I'd like a *doppio*, no whip, *venti* experience with Jesus, please." It just doesn't happen in that vending-machine way. But I think it **does** happen to people who pay close attention in prayer – in all forms of prayer, whether it's in silent contemplation, in active intercession, in working for justice and the kingdom of God, or giving God thanks for the grandeur of a mountain range or the beauty and joy of looking into the eyes of a child.

*How is God with us? How is God with you?*

I have had the sense that there was someone with me and that it was Jesus. And I could feel a warm hand on my shoulder, comforting me and giving me encouragement. Now, before you say, "Bah, humbug!" I know it could have been a reaction in my sympathetic nervous system, but I don't think so. I interpret it as "God with us." And it certainly isn't up to me when I'm able to sense the presence of the Christ; it's a gift.

Sometimes the earth moves when one senses "God with us," and sometimes it doesn't. Even if your experience of Immanuel isn't cataclysmic, that **doesn't** mean it's invalid!

I'd also like to assert that, especially in matters of faith, it's fine not to have it all figured out, because *none of us does*, and anyone who claims to is either lying or so far evolved as to be worthy of worship. (I've only met people in the former category.)

Paul Ricoeur was a brilliant French philosopher and theologian who taught at the University of Chicago, and he wrote about a way of biblical interpretation he called "post-critical naiveté," which is the idea that we can try to apprehend something with the full force of reason, and then back off a bit and pursue a deeper sense of understanding by using its symbolic, mythic dimension. So, for example, we can get really into picking apart the

virgin birth, but we can lose sight of the forest for the trees; we lose the real meaning. Instead, we might examine the virgin birth critically, but then allow our imaginations to reappropriate the symbolic value of the story: that Jesus is God with us in a very real, but a very unproveable, way. During Advent and Christmas, it's important not to become so entangled in teasing out the historical literalness of the virgin birth that we lose its mystery, its symbolic value, and its beauty.

Mary was the first bearer of Christ, but she is not the only one. Since the moment of his birth, Jesus has lived in the hearts of people. After his crucifixion, he continued to live on, borne along by the faithful from generation to generation. Even when the historical Jesus was dead and gone, the cosmic Christ continued to be present with us, and is with us here today.

Like Mary, we must be willing to hear the voice of the angel saying, "Do not be afraid," and then dare to be willing to be vehicles of God's grace. Like Joseph, we must listen for the voice of the angel in a dream, and know that the one who will enter our lives is a special, living presence.

How will you be a bearer of Christ this Christmas? How will you open your heart to the presence of God in our midst?

In my experience, it won't happen by accident, but rather by paying attention to the movement of the Holy Spirit and then having the intention to act upon it. To listen for the voice of God speaking through the persons around us; in the text of a Christmas card or the familiar words of a carol; in the words of children in a Christmas play; or in the moonlight of a still winter evening.

God *is* still speaking, but we must have ears attuned to hear what she is whispering to us.

If you need a break from all of the preparations, the shopping, the mailing, the traveling, the stress of family visits, I'd invite you to spend some quiet moments with God. Don't worry as much about what you're giving or getting; lose the fear you feel about relatives who don't appreciate you, because *God is with you*. Try to breathe in the true spirit of the season: Immanuel. And breathe out with gratitude for all the ways God is *with you* in your life. For we have been given the ultimate Christmas present: Jesus himself and the continuing presence of Christ. And, like love, it's a present we can pass along without losing the tiniest bit of it.

"Let every heart prepare him room."

Amen.