

“God With Us - Emmanuel”

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John 1: 1-9 NRSV Advent Two

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I heard the story of a church that decided to freshen up the traditional Christmas Pageant. They wanted it to be more modern, and so the Sunday school teacher and the kids re-wrote it. There were the familiar members of the cast: Joseph, the shepherds, the three wise men, the star, and an angel propped up in the background. But Mary was nowhere to be seen. Suddenly from behind some bales of hay came the sound of loud groaning. Evidently Mary was in labour.

Soon a doctor arrived, dressed in a white coat with a stethoscope around his neck. Joseph, with a look of relief on his face, took the doctor through the hay bales to Mary, then started pacing back and forth. After a few moments, the doctor emerged with a big smile on his face.

"Congratulations, Joseph," he said, "It's a God!"

The words in the prologue to John's Gospel, "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God...*" are deep and poetic, and designed to say to us that something very significant occurred when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea — something beyond the comprehension of human minds.

"Congratulations, Joseph, it's a God!"

We have been doing a series on Christian Doctrine — what we believe as Christians. Today we are going to talk about the Incarnation.

One of my favourite hymns to hear in a shopping mall is the one we are ending the service with today: “Hark the Herald Angels Sing”. It is just dripping with theology. Written by Charles Wesley in 1739, the carol contains the words: “*Veiled in flesh the God-head see; hail, the incarnate deity, pleased with us in flesh to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel!*”

Incarnation is what we celebrate at Christmas, and very simply ‘incarnation’ means ‘God becoming human’. The Incarnation is central to the Christian understanding of God.

As the opening chapter of John's Gospel beautifully articulates, Jesus always was. Jesus was there at Creation. Jesus is the fullest expression of God. I don't believe, as some do, that the Incarnation was God's plan B, let alone plan 'C' or 'D'. Here's the theory: plan 'A' (in the form of Adam and Eve) got screwed up in the garden, and then plan 'B' (starting over again with Noah and the flood) didn't work out, and then plan 'C' (the prophets

call God's people back) didn't fly either, so God decided to send his son. But Jesus *always was and is and is to come*. Jesus Christ is not an afterthought of God — as Colossians 1:15 expresses: *“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created...”*

To put the purpose of the incarnation clearly, a Franciscan saying goes like this: *“Jesus did not come to change the mind of God about humanity; Jesus came to change the mind of humanity about God.”*

What does the Incarnation tell us about God? It tells us that God loves creation and that creation is good. God was not just slumming it. Some Christians and other religious traditions over the centuries have been *up* on the Spirit and *down* on the body. Spirit good; body bad. With the heresy of Docetism, some believed that God was only pretending to be human. No real God would take on an icky human form. The human body was just a disguise or a mask for God, and that God didn't really enter into the fullness and the limitations of being human. But that is precisely the power of what we believe.

We believe that Jesus was fully human and fully God, not part God and part human. Neither was Jesus just a human who was super-close to God, nor all-God pretending to be human: Jesus is fully human and fully divine. The incarnation speaks of God's great love for what God created. It also means that creation can't be used and abused. We are to respect *all* humans as made in the image of God, and we are to respect God's creation.



It is significant that Jesus came as a tiny, fragile baby who needed to be changed and burped. That's the second thing it means. God really does understand and know our pain and our struggle and our limitations.

Jesus began life utterly dependent on limited humans. His very survival depended on imperfect people in a far less than perfect situation. It seems to me that this is still the case. The message of the Gospel; the love of God is still on the one hand powerful, and on the other hand fragile and utterly dependent on us to nurture and grow.

Jesus didn't know everything from the start; like all humans, as the Bible says: *“he grew in wisdom and stature”*. He experienced hunger and thirst and of course experienced tremendous suffering on the cross. As a

result, God really does understand your struggle, your fear, your frustration, your fatigue, your pain, your loss.

Jesus was born into a particular time and place. In The Message version of the Bible, Eugene Paterson translates John chapter one with “*The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood.*” He was not born inside the temple or synagogue or the church but out there in the real world to real people.



I love this image by comic artist Everett Patterson called “*Joséy Maria*”. Notice all the Biblical imagery “Dave’s City Motel (Bethlehem was the city of David), the Wisemen Cigarettes, the graffiti on the side of the phone booth says Ezek 34: 15-16 *“I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.”* I love the little plant that is growing up through the littered, dirty, grey sidewalk.

Throughout the Bible we get a sense that God has a special love for the powerless. God raises up those whom the world sees as dirt and bottom feeders and puts them in a special place. The incarnation takes that general Godly ideal and perspective and makes it concrete flesh and blood. God is born in manure to a woman of no name or status. In the rest of the life of Jesus, we see a man of humility and service rejecting power and status and privilege.

Jesus was born out there in the world in less than ideal conditions. The birth narrative in the Bible is not sweet and sentimental. No – instead, as one of my theology textbooks says:

“Christmas is the story of a radical invasion of God into the kind of real world where we live all year long—a world where there is political unrest and injustice, poverty, hatred, jealousy and both the fear and the longing that things could be different.” (Shirley Guthrie). As our scripture reading said this morning:

“The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.” Because Jesus came to shine in the dark, we as Christians are called to be God-bearers and light-bearers out there in the world.

Recently I came across the story of a young man who had been struggling with the urge to commit suicide. One morning he decided that this was the day. But first he headed to the Tim Hortons in Pickering, Ontario for his final cup of coffee. When he got to the window and picked up the coffee, he reached for his wallet, but the server said to him “It’s free! The guy ahead of you paid for it, and he told me to tell you to have a great day!” The young man was stunned. This small act of generosity changed his mind. In an anonymous letter to the local newspaper, he thanked the man who had saved his life.

Through Jesus we see the face of God. Through Jesus we see God’s love for **all** humanity. Through Jesus we know God then and there but also here and now for us. Through the birth of Jesus we know that God loves

you, and you, and you and me. Through the birth of Jesus we know that we are not alone.

I'm going to tell you one of my favourite Christmas stories. I've told it a couple of times here before. There is just something about this story that speaks to me of the Incarnation of Jesus our Emmanuel.

It's a true story that happened in 1994 when two Americans answered an invitation from the Russian department of Education to teach morals and ethics based on biblical principles in the public schools of Russia. This was not long after the fall of Communism in Russia. They were invited as well to teach in some businesses, to fire and police departments, and at a large orphanage. The orphanage housed about one hundred children, all of whom had been abandoned, and many of whom had been abused. The two Americans relate the story in their own words:

"It was nearing Christmas, in 1994 when we read the traditional story of Christmas to the orphans. For almost all of them, it was their very first time to hear the story. We told them about Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem, and finding no room in the inn. We told them how the couple went to a stable, where the baby Jesus was born and how they placed him in a manger.

Throughout, the children, and orphanage staff, sat listening in eager amazement. It was a story that had never been heard before. Eagerly, they leaned forward, not wanting to miss a single word. After telling the story, we gave each of the children pieces of cardboard to make a manger scene. Some bits of straw were provided for each little manger. Small squares of flannel from an old nightgown were used for the baby's blanket. Tan-coloured felt was used to cut out doll-like babies for each manger.

As the children were making their mangers, I walked around them to see if they needed any help. All was going normally until I got to the table where little Misha sat. He looked to be about six years old and had finished his project. As I looked at the little boy's manger, I was surprised to see not one, but two babies in the manger. I called the translator over to ask the lad why he had placed two babies in the manger. Crossing his arms in front of him and looking at this completed manger scene, the child began to repeat the story very seriously.

For such a young boy, who had only just heard the Christmas story for the first time, he repeated it very accurately, until he came to the part where Mary put the baby Jesus in the manger. Then Misha started to ad-lib. He made up his own ending to the story. What he said was, "And when Mary laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay. I told him I have no mamma and I have no papa, so I don't

have any place to stay. Then Jesus told me I could stay with him. But I told him I couldn't, because I didn't have a gift to give him like everybody else did.

But I wanted to stay with Jesus so I thought about what I could use for a gift. I thought maybe if I kept him warm, that would be a good gift. So I asked Jesus, 'If I keep you warm, will that be a good enough gift?' And Jesus told me, 'If you keep me warm, that will be the best gift anybody ever gave me.' So I got into the manger too, and then Jesus looked at me and he told me I could always stay with him." As little Misha said this, his eyes brimmed with tears, and his shoulders began to shake as he sobbed and sobbed.

That, friends, is what all this lofty theology comes down to. Jesus loves you. May you open your heart to his love and know that you are never alone. May you share that radiant, fragile love, that Peace that the Christ child brings with someone else who needs it this season. Thanks be to God.