

# Christmas Eve Reflections

Matthew 1:18-25

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ December 24, 2019 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

<sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

<sup>23</sup> “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” <sup>24</sup> When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup> but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. (Matthew 1:18-25, NRSV)



Many years ago when I worked as a church youth director I spent a lot of time at high schools watching kids I knew compete in sports. Jim was a kid in our youth group who was a runner. I didn't particularly care much for high school track meets in those days, but I did care about Jim so I ended up sitting in the stands at the high school track plenty of afternoons. Without fail, Fred was also there. Fred was Jim's dad. He worked in finance and had done very well for himself, even owned his own company. I could only imagine how much responsibility he shouldered. Furthermore, besides Jim he had three other kids which added to the load. Still, Fred was always there in the stands, often still in his coat and tie from work, watching his son compete on the track.

Granted, not all kids are thrilled that their parents show up to watch them compete. I don't blame them. Some parents tend to yell things from the stands that make their kids wish they'd stayed home. Not Fred. He was always quiet, attentive but quiet. And so I asked Jim one time, “Does your dad come to every single track meet?” He told me that yes, he did. “Every time I'm about to race I look up to see if I can spot my dad in the stands, and every time I look up, there he is.”

That conversation happened 30 years ago and I still remember it. Without knowing it, Fred Yeager actually served as an inspiration to me when I became a dad myself years later. Admittedly, I haven't always been there to watch every soccer game, every track meet, but I've done my best. It's great to hear about your kids' game later that evening. It's good to think about them while they're playing and hope they are doing well. But nothing compares to being there in person, especially when some level of sacrifice is required to do so.

That being said, there is even another level of being with another person, another level that goes beyond just physical presence. When I was a freshman in college my friends and I decided to get our ears pierced. This was 1984 and not a lot of young men wore earrings in those days so it was pushing the boundaries a bit. I still remember the day. The four of us went to Hillsdale Mall and found a little kiosk where a young woman said she'd happily do the job for \$18. I went first. I'm not sure why I went first, but I did. Before I knew it there was a big silver stud in my left ear. Hurt a bit. Touch of blood. But the deed was done.

Immediately, my friends had second thoughts. Every single one of them. Second thoughts that ended up being final thoughts. Maybe it was how bad I actually looked with an earring? Maybe this was their plan all along? I'm not sure I've ever really gotten the whole truth out of them. Whatever the reason, I was the only one who went home that day to explain to his parents why he was now wearing jewelry in his ear. My friends were with me that day in one sense, but in another sense, a far more important sense, none of them was really *with* me.

Those who are grief counselors talk about something called the “companioning philosophy of grief care.”<sup>1</sup> Most of us, when we are in a place of grief, we need somebody *with* us in that place. And yes, somebody physically with us is a good start. But what is most helpful is another person who is not just with us in the room, but with us in our grief, one who shares our tears, and our loss, and our pain. The English word ‘companion’ is taken from two Latin words which literally mean “one who breaks bread with another.” You might say then that your companion is somebody

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<sup>1</sup> Great insights from an article by Alan Wolfelt, “The Companioning Philosophy of Grief Care: Being Present to Pain”, January 12, 2016. See <https://www.taps.org/articles/2016/companioningphilosophy>

who eats what you are eating. If you are consuming grief, they consume grief with you. If it's joy you are feasting on, they share in the feast. It reminds me of these instructions in Romans 12:15: **“Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.”** The Bible teaches us to be companions in this way for one another.

I tell you all this to set you up to think again about what we just read from Matthew's Gospel. One night, we're told, Joseph has a dream. It's a good thing he did. His fiancé was pregnant even though they had never slept together. That was a problem. There was no good explanation in Joseph's mind for this news. Most men in those days would have punished Mary with public disgrace or worse. But Joseph was not most men and so he had decided to break things off quietly. That's when he has this dream in which an angel reveals to him that there actually is a good, even righteous, explanation for this pregnancy. There is no other man involved. Mary had been faithful, more faithful than Joseph realizes. The child in Mary's womb was from God. In fact, the child was God. The baby was the long-awaited Messiah, the Savior of the world. The angel then reminded Joseph of what the prophet Isaiah had declared long ago: **“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.”**<sup>2</sup>

'Emmanuel' is a Hebrew word that means “God with us”, or more literally, “The With-Us God”. If the name accurately describes God, that God is not distant but nearby, then this truly is very good news. In a recent Wall Street Journal opinion piece, psychoanalyst Erica Komisar declares that for kids these days growing up in an increasingly instable and anxiety-producing world, one of the best antidotes – and this has been proven – is a belief in God, a belief in a protective and transcendent figure who is with us in this life and the next.

Apparently, there is something about our belief in God that brings us peace. She goes as far as to encourage parents who don't believe in God to lie to their children, if only for mental-health reasons. The belief that one day we simply die and turn to dust may work for some adults, she says, but it doesn't help children all that much.<sup>3</sup>

But what if it doesn't have to be a lie? What if we can have complete integrity when tell our kids that God does exist and that he is, in fact, not distant! God is with us. God *wants* to be with us!

When Isaiah first spoke the words the angel quotes in Joseph's dream, he was speaking to King Ahaz of Judah in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. In a time of massive geopolitical drama, Ahaz and his tiny nation were being threatened by neighboring nations which seemed poised to invade and conquer. Seemingly out of options, Ahaz was tempted to turn to an ancient enemy, Assyria, for protection. So Isaiah comes to Ahaz one day and implores him to be patient. The Lord will provide a way forward. Do not trust in other nations; trust in the Lord. God would even give Ahaz a sign of his faithfulness. Isaiah prophesizes that a young woman known to Ahaz at that time would soon give birth to a son and named him Emmanuel, The With-Us God. Before that child was old enough to know right from wrong, the nations Ahaz feared would be destroyed. This was God's promise. Ahaz just needed to be patient. He just needed to trust God.<sup>4</sup> If you know the story you know that tragically Ahaz chose not to trust God. In the face of impending circumstances, it was just too difficult for him to hold on.

It's always difficult to trust. It's why this is a message God sent to his people over and over and over again. 114 times in the Old Testament God tells his people, “I will be with you.” It's the most common expression of reassurance found in the scriptures.<sup>5</sup> As we read from Matthew, the New Testament picks up the same chorus right away. Emmanuel. God is with you. Those are among the first words spoken about Jesus. And do you remember the last words spoken *by* Jesus in the Gospels? Matthew 28:20: **“I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”**<sup>6</sup> In speaking about the end of time, some of the very last words of the Bible itself declare, **“God will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them...”**<sup>7</sup> Over and over and over again God promises us, “I will be with you.”

Consider all this carefully with me for just a moment tonight. Jesus is Emmanuel. God *with* us. Physically Christ came to be *with* us. He took on flesh and blood, became one of us, walked among us, revealed God to us through his life. But more than that, Jesus wasn't just with us...he was *with* us. He was our companion, eating from the very table of human experience. He consumed our pain, our hurt, our struggle, experiencing every hardship of life in this world. On the cross he consumed the consequences of our sin, taking all the shame and guilt, even the wrath of God, onto himself. In the grave he even consumed our death.

<sup>2</sup> From Isaiah 7:14

<sup>3</sup> Erica Komisar, “Don't Believe in God? Lie to Your Children”, *The Wall Street Journal*, December 5, 2019. See article at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/dont-believe-in-god-lie-to-your-children-11575591658>

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah tells him in the end, **“If you do not stand in faith, you shall not stand at all.”** - Isaiah 7:9 (NRSV)

<sup>5</sup> Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, Volume 2 (Eerdmans, 2002), 829.

<sup>6</sup> NRSV

<sup>7</sup> Revelation 21:3 (NRSV)

This is the scandalous good news of Christmas, that the eternal God of heaven is with us in all things. In Christ, he is closer to you than you can imagine. And this isn't just true for some people, but for all people. In Christ, God came to be with anyone who would choose to be with him. He doesn't discriminate by status, or intellect, or age, or race, or culture, or even goodness. No matter who you are, he shares your grief. He shares your loneliness. He shares your doubts. He shares your pain. As our companion, he eats what we are eating.

But the best news is that Christ not only came to be with us, but he invites us, by faith, to come and be *with* him. As his companion, we are invited in turn to eat what he is eating. He consumed our grief; we can share one day in his joy. He consumed our loneliness; we can share in his family, beloved children along with him of our Heavenly Father. He consumed our doubts; we can share in his truth. He consumed our pain; we can share in his pleasure. He consumed our sin; we can share in his righteousness.<sup>8</sup> He consumed our death; we can share in his life.

This requires faith. It always has. Long ago it did for Ahaz, and he failed to trust. Now it does for us as well. We must believe. I don't know the circumstances of your life as it stands tonight but I can at least guess that your life is not without trouble. We all face trouble and hardship. We live in a world, even in a nation, that is full of hardship and trouble. In the midst of all this we hear God's voice, not just at Christmas but all year round, echoing this refrain: "Emmanuel. Emmanuel. Emmanuel." God is with us. In Christ he is not just with us, but *with* us. Do you believe it? In spite of whatever it might be that you face in life, can you hold out hope that God is with us and, more importantly, know that as we keep faith there will come a day when we will be with God.

Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> II Corinthians 5:21 declares, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."