

IS GOD WITH US?

The Rev. Chase Danford
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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 fulfill 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.. (Matthew 1:23)

There is a painting in the Brooklyn Museum's collection that I've meditated on as I think about Joseph and the situation in which he finds himself in today's gospel reading. The painting is called the Anxiety of St. Joseph, by the 19th century French artist James Tissot. The artist depicts Joseph, a carpenter, at work in his woodshop. Well, not actually at work. Instead, Joseph is bent over his work table, carpentry tool in one hand, chin resting on the other, surrounded by wood waiting to be worked. As the curator's note explains,

"Betrothed but still unmarried, Mary and Joseph do not yet live together, making the news of her unexpected pregnancy a cause of deep concern for Joseph. Ordinarily industrious, as the curled wood shavings around his feet attest, the carpenter hunches over his bench, lost in thought and unable to work. In the hope of catching a glimpse of Mary, he gazes out at the street as women pass carrying jars filled with the day's water."¹

What is Joseph thinking? How long has it been since he learned of his fiancée's unplanned pregnancy with a child not his own? How long has he been deliberating about what he'll do. He knows that if he allows knowledge of her situation to come out, she will become a social pariah and could even be at risk of death, since the penalty on the books for a woman who had a physical relationship outside of marriage was execution by stoning. We are told that Joseph is a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace. The original Greek leaves open an intriguing question in this statement. Is his righteousness the reason why he is unwilling to shame Mary, or is his faithfulness to the law and its requirements at odds with his desire to shield her as much as he can. Could this actually be a foreshadowing of Jesus' arguments with his opponents that one could follow the law by the letter and not be righteous, while someone could more faithfully fulfill the spirit of the law while seeming to break it?

Or, we might wonder, is this less a case of theological and ethical soul-searching, and more about a broken heart in search of a way to piece itself back together? We are often reminded that Joseph and Mary's marriage was likely not a love match, but an arrangement made by two families. But in this rendering by Tissot, in which Joseph is carrying the weight of the world on

¹ <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/4426>

his shoulders, one can easily imagine that Joseph's anxiety is not just about doing the right thing, but about how to face betrayal by his beloved. What if he chooses mercy over the penalties of law not just because he is a good man, but because he loves her and still seeks what is best for her even when he is deeply hurt.

Whatever his reasons were, Joseph had decided to go the quiet route instead of the public one, the path of mercy rather than vengeance. But just as he had settled on his plan and finally went to sleep with his mind relatively at peace, an angel of the Lord appears in his dreams. Now, there's a little discrepancy here that's worth noting. We're told that when Joseph wakes up, he does as the angel commanded him. But in the dream, the angel does not actually command Joseph to go through with his marriage. The angel says, "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife." And then explains that this is a special child, a holy child. An angel of the Lord's invitation to not be afraid is probably just as good as a commandment, but I think it could be significant that Joseph is given something of a choice. Joseph was no doubt relieved that Mary had not betrayed him, but it's also quite possible that the angel bids him to put aside his fear not just of the social implications of Mary's pregnancy, but also of what he's about to tell him. That this is a child of prophecy, one who will save his people." Would Joseph fear the prospect of raising a child like this? If he knew what the child was destined for, yes, of course he would have been afraid, for this child of prophecy is cause for celebration and mourning.

The child is given two names. His parents will name him Jesus, which in Hebrew, Yeshuah, means, Yahweh is Salvation, or Yahweh saves. He will also be called Emmanuel, God is with us. In Christian theology, the notion of Emmanuel gives rise to the doctrine of the Incarnation, that God became human. These two names Jesus and Emmanuel, Yahweh saves and God is with us, together teach us a great deal about this holy child. Yahweh is salvation because God is with us. God saves us by becoming one of us and showing us how to live our lives in a way that is directed toward God. But that salvation walks the way of the cross.

Emmanuel. God is with us. God *is* with us, right? The word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory. A glory that outshines the darkness. Right?

That is what we put our hope in, and yet sometimes it can seem hard to believe. Sometimes the darkness seems to swallow the light. How do we proclaim Jesus saves and look toward the birth of the holy child at Christmas when we have seen the horrors of the fall of Aleppo in these days leading up to our sacred celebration of the Incarnation. Four years ago, again days before Christmas, 20 children and six adults were killed in their classrooms in Newtown, Connecticut. President Obama said, "Our hearts are broken today," and yet the brokenness of our political system and our cultural fascination with violence proved more powerful than our hearts. On average a gun has been fired on a school campus every week for the past four years, with many shootings resulting in more death. And while one white gunman was convicted this week for killing nine people in a historically African American church in Charleston, racialized violence continues in this country, and hate crimes have increased in the wake of a presidential election which seemed to give impunity to hateful speech. The church in Charleston was, as you might remember, named Emmanuel. How many more Emmanuels have to die to save our human family from its sins of violence?

Emmanuel. God is with us. Is God with us?

Yes, God is with us. But God came among us not only to live, but also to live by dying, and by doing so triumph over death forever. By dying, Jesus would turn on their heads the death-dealing forces of the world and show us the unholy nature of social systems that demand sacrificial victims. Jesus was a threat to peace made between a collaborationist religious hierarchy and an occupying army. And so he was sacrificed for that false peace. Empires built on the will to power cannot not survive. The only king to triumph over death was our Prince of Peace, Jesus the carpenter and itinerant teacher from Nazareth. When the early church proclaimed Jesus is Lord, they knew that in doing so, they were also declaring that Caesar is not Lord.

Caesar is not Lord, and neither are the despots of our time. Do you remember the little Syrian boy, Omran Daqneesh, who was rescued from the rubble of his family's apartment building in Aleppo? In a photo made famous this past August, he sat unmoving, face bloody, bruised, and covered in dust. A classmate of mine from seminary recently shared a photo of a religious icon that a friend of hers made. In place of the baby Jesus, little Omran sits in his orange ambulance seat, attended by three angels. Omran should never have been on the front page of newspapers around the world. He should never have had to experience the death of a sibling and the trauma of living through a civil war. But having done so, he becomes for us another face of the truth that God is with us. It's hard to see God in such tragedy, but God was present in the awakening of consciousness and compassion that Omran sparked across the world. God was present in the angels of mercy that attended Omran in that ambulance. In a civil war and international crisis with many villains and few heroes on the battlefield, the real face of God is a suffering child. The hands and feet of God are the medical professionals, first responders, and humanitarian workers who risk their lives to save others.

The truth of Emmanuel, God with us, is that God became human so that we might become a little more clearly the image—the icon—of God we were created to be. This begins by being open to the pain inside ourselves and the world around us. This week I heard the theologian James Alison say that redemption begins with a broken heart. Joseph searched his broken heart for a righteous solution to his seeming betrayal. He chose the path of mercy. God met him along the way and helped him to find an even deeper love within himself. A love that encompassed not only his betrothed, Mary, but also her fatherless child of the Holy Spirit. Like Joseph, many of us find our hearts are weighed down and broken. Perhaps in the face of our nation's political divisions or the global migrant and refugee crisis, or perhaps closer to home, with those who sleep on our streets, or perhaps closest of all, in fractured family and interpersonal relationships, and in the loss of loved ones or the loss of dreams. We are not alone in any of these. God is with us. God is present in the darkest of circumstances, when the light is hard to see. But it is there. Emmanuel, God with us, dwells among us, “where charity stands watching, and faith holds wide the door, the dark night wakes, the glory breaks, and Christmas comes once more.”² Christmas comes once more, this year and every year, until the end of the ages. Christmas comes once more, and will see Christ's glory, full of grace and truth, full of hope and life.

² Phillips Brooks, “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” Hymnal 1982