

Emmanuel—God with Us—Always
The Reverend Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield
Fourth Sunday in Advent, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary
December 23, 2007

When I read today's gospel reading, I found a few things jumping out at me. The first is this: Joseph was an obedient and righteous man. We read many stories and traditions about Mary being chosen to bear Jesus, Emmanuel, the Son of God. We speculate on whether she was dedicated to serve in the temple before returning home to be married, on how she was a pure vessel, on what made her 'worthy' of such an honor. But little is often said about Joseph. In fact, other than the fact that he was a carpenter and a righteous man, we know hardly anything about him.

But today's reading focuses on Joseph, and his response to God's action. Imagine what a difficult situation he must have been in. Betrothed to Mary, he finds out that she is pregnant. Even though she claims that this baby is of God, who would believe that? Would you? He must have been hurt, and angry. How could this happen? Was he not good enough? This did not seem like her, did he know her so little? And now he had a choice to make: to maintain the relationship or not.

As a first century Jewish man, he would have been well within his rights to expose her condition, which could lead to banishment, being ostracized, or even being killed. After all, the penalty for adultery was stoning. But Joseph was unwilling to do that—whether he was stayed by love or compassion or just plain wanting to spare himself embarrassment as well, we will never know. However, he could not in good conscience complete his marriage to Mary. This child was not his; how could he ever trust her? He did not want to live a life of resentment and suspicion either. So he resolved to dissolve the relationship quietly, so that Mary's parents could perhaps send her away and spare the family the shame of an out of wedlock grandchild.

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God, however, knew Jesus would need an earthly father, a good man, as a caretaker and role model in his life. After all, the world was a dangerous place for single mothers and small children. And Joseph was a man of faith, in right relationship to God; a man willing to be obedient to God even if it involved some risk. Furthermore, perhaps God didn't want Joseph to make the mistake of being angry and hurt—and perhaps allowing that to drive a wedge between God and Joseph—when it wasn't necessary. No, Joseph needed to hear the truth—again.

So an angel came to Joseph in a dream. Now dreams were considered—and oftentimes still are—powerful and revealing. Kings even used to hire dream interpreters. Joseph, son of Jacob, rose to prominence in Egypt for his ability to accurately discern the meanings of the Pharaoh's dreams and thus saved his family from famine. Many of the Old Testament prophets received messages through dreams as well. Dreams are a time when our conscious defenses are down, when our intuitive side comes to the fore, when the impossible can happen.

And so the angel told Joseph that yes, the impossible did happen: Mary's coming child is of God: a child to be named Jesus, which means, 'Jehovah is salvation'. He is the one who is fulfill the ancient prophecy. This was not a child conceived in deception and betrayal, but a child conceived in love and for love, and for salvation, redemption. No, he would not 'belong' to Joseph, but rather would belong to the whole world. Now Joseph understood—God was with Joseph in a very real and immediate way, in a new way. And Joseph listened, and acted.

Just as God was present to Joseph in this dream, so powerful that it spurred him to change his mind and complete his marriage to Mary, God became present to the whole world, in a brand new way. That is the other word that leaped out at me—the word 'Emmanuel', or God with us.

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God chose to be among God's people in a very real and intimate way—not just ensconced safely behind palace walls or to be confined to the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem temple. To Joseph, to you, to me—this is powerful, almost downright scary. God dwelling with us? For Mary, God dwelling in her? What a gift—and a responsibility! This will be no ordinary child. And yet, Joseph did not turn away, he did not try to excuse his way out of it, as Moses tried to when charged with leading the Hebrews out of Egypt. Joseph was obedient, embracing the fact that with God, all things are possible. A virgin can be with child, and a carpenter will shelter and shepherd a king, the King of all creation.

God continues to be present in all our lives today as well—in very real and intimate ways. Just like we often can't detect our own heartbeat, or pay little attention to the rhythm of our breathing, we too often overlook all the many small ways God meets us day to day. God is present, in each moment of our lives, helping us to bear what comes, calling to us with love, walking through the joys and sorrows and the oftentimes hum-drum of our lives. Whether it's rushing around taking care of business or family (or both!), or sitting still in prayer, or even facing a moment you wished has never happened—God is there. Emmanuel—God with us—always.

For all things are possible with God—just ask Joseph.

Amen.

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