

## Fourth Sunday of Advent Sunday, December 19, 2010

### GOSPEL: Matthew 1:18-25

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

23”Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, “God is with us.”

24When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

18Τοῦ δὲ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἡ γένεσις οὕτως ἦν. μνηστευθείσης τῆς μητρὸς αὐτοῦ Μαρίας τῷ Ἰωσήφ, πρὶν ἢ συνελθεῖν αὐτοὺς εὐρέθη ἐν γαστρὶ ἔχουσα ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου. 19Ἰωσήφ δὲ ὁ ἀνὴρ αὐτῆς, δίκαιος ὢν καὶ μὴ θέλων αὐτὴν δειγματίσαι, ἐβουλήθη λάθρᾳ ἀπολῦσαι αὐτήν. 20ταῦτα δὲ αὐτοῦ ἐνθυμηθέντος ἰδοὺ ἄγγελος κυρίου κατ’ ὄναρ ἐφάνη αὐτῷ λέγων, Ἰωσήφ υἱὸς Δαβὶδ, μὴ φοβηθῆς παραλαβεῖν Μαρίαν τὴν γυναῖκά σου, τὸ γὰρ ἐν αὐτῇ γεννηθὲν ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου: 21τέξεται δὲ υἱὸν καὶ καλέσεις τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦν, αὐτὸς γὰρ σώσει τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν. 22Τοῦτο δὲ ὅλον γέγονεν ἵνα πληρωθῇ τὸ ῥηθὲν ὑπὸ κυρίου διὰ τοῦ προφήτου λέγοντος,

23Ἴδου ἡ παρθένος ἐν γαστρὶ ἔξει καὶ τέξεται υἱόν, καὶ καλέσουσιν τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἐμμανουήλ, ὃ ἐστὶν μεθερμηνευόμενον Μεθ’ ἡμῶν ὁ θεός.

24ἐγερθεὶς δὲ ὁ Ἰωσήφ ἀπὸ τοῦ ὕπνου ἐποίησεν ὡς προσέταξεν αὐτῷ ὁ ἄγγελος κυρίου καὶ παρέλαβεν τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ: 25καὶ οὐκ ἐγένωσκεν αὐτὴν ἕως οὗ ἔτεκεν υἱόν: καὶ ἐκάλεσεν τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦν.

### *Immanuel or Emmanuel?*

+ *In nomine Domini. Amen.*

In the Summer of 2007, when our small group of Jews and Christians were exploring the breadth and depth of Israel, we were in the care of an extremely gentle, jovial and learned Jewish guide who name was Philip. In Nazareth, Capernaum, Jerusalem ... whenever he spoke of Jesus, he always called him *Yeshua Immanuel* ... and whenever he did that, I thought about the opening chapter of the Gospel According to Matthew that is always read on the Fourth Sunday in Advent in the Year of Matthew. You just heard it this morning.

In many ways Philip was the Gospel of Matthew personified, and I have to say that ever since our encounter with him and with the sites and sounds and sensations of the places where Jesus lived

and taught, whenever I hear the name of Jesus, inside my head resounds that double-name *Yeshua Immanuel*.

Those are the names we hear in this Gospel Portion this morning ... they are both Hebrew names from the Hebrew Scriptures, the “Old Testament”, translated into New Testament Greek. *Yeshua* which is a shortened form of *Joshua* becomes in Greek *Iesous* ... and means “He saves” with the “he” understood to be God ... and *Immanuel* from two Hebrew words *El* meaning “God” and *Immanu* meaning “with us” ... put them together and you have *Immanuel=God is with us*.

Hebrew is written without vowels, and when you read the word in an English translation of the Bible as in the Isaiah 7.14 which the Gospel Writer we call Matthew quotes this morning, *Immanuel* is written with the initial letter “I” because that is the unwritten vowel sound. When the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek, the translators rendered the word based upon pronunciation and the way you get that sound in Greek is to use an initial “E” (epsilon). So in answer to the question posed by the sermon title, *Immanuel or Emmanuel?* ... the answer is “Yes.” Both spellings are correct ... with an “I” if you are reading in the “Old Testament” and with an “E” if you are reading Matthew 1.23 ... which is, by the way, the only time the word *Emmanuel* appears in the New Testament, in Matthew’s quotation of Isaiah.



There are only two birth narratives of *Yeshua Immanuel* in the New Testament, and neither of them occur in the earliest Gospel, the Gospel According to Mark. In fact, Mark does not begin with the Birth of Jesus at all, rather with his baptism in the River Jordan at the direction of John the Baptizer.

And there is no birth story of Jesus in the Gospel of John, which begins, as you know and will remember and which we will hear read on Christmas Day, for John is the Gospel of Christmas Day, that gospel begins with an ancient Christian Hymn singing the wonder of the *Word made flesh*.

No, there are only two birth narratives in the Gospels, one is in Luke (which by tradition we read on Christmas Eve) and the other you have just heard this morning in the story by the Gospel Writer we know as Matthew.

And Matthew has a point to make in his story, written in a community of followers of Jesus whose roots are very Jewish. The point is this: God’s saving action comes in the person of *Yeshua Immanuel* ... remember “God saves” and “God is with us.”

Matthew quotes Isaiah and the story of the political crisis in the late 8<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, where and when it was that Syria and the northern Kingdom Israel had allied against weaker Judah in the south. The situation seemed hopeless, but Isaiah the prophet assured King Hezekiah of Judah that liberation would come in as short a time as it takes for a young woman to conceive, bear a child and the child become a toddler. Symbolically that child would be called *Immanuel, God with us* ... as a sure sign of the liberation to come.

And indeed the answer arrived. Assyria swept down to the south, overran Syria and Israel and Judah was safe.

As Christians reflected on the meaning of Jesus and the miracle of his birth, it comes as no surprise that they found in that Isaiah Story substance for who Jesus was and is.<sup>1</sup>

For Matthew, the story is not just about a God who has acted in the past through the prophets and heroes of old ... for Matthew, Jesus is unique, the unique meeting of the divine in the human, the human in the divine ... not as a doctrine as it would be hammered out later on the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, but as a *Saving Presence*. When Matthew uses the word *Emmanuel* “God with Us”, he does not mean, here is God and not a man; rather he means, God is meeting us, encountering us in the man Jesus, who was uniquely created and empowered by god through God’s Spirit.

Uniquely empowered through the birth of Jesus by *Maria* (to use her Greek name) without the impregnation by *Ioseph* (to use his Greek name) ... where *Ioseph* himself, much as we would like to put him “away in the Manger” and off to the side, is every bit involved in the “God saves, God with us” story ... for he does not do what he could have done by Hebrew Law, turned *Maria* away and out into the streets and a life of prostitution or worse, *Ioseph* is one of the principal actors in the Story, says Matthew, and has a divine-angelic message to prove it ... and indeed is the first example of *God saves* in this Gospel Story, because Joseph does just that ... he saves Mary, and by saving Mary, he saves her son.

It’s the New Testament Era way of expressing in human words what was *experienced* in life and was in some manner, maybe in every manner, something beyond human words. Remember, brothers and sisters, the Bible is not to be read *literally*, the story is Story, and to read it or hear it or tell it in any other way is to miss the Story itself. The expectation of every Gospel in the New Testament is that you and I will read ourselves *into* the Story, so that it becomes a tale not only for us, but about us, and – in the words of Matthew – *with us*.

In this is the saving power of God. When we come to believe that we are alone, isolated, forgotten, neglected, hopeless creatures walking upon this Earth ... the story of “*God saves* (Yeshua) of *God with us* (Emmanuel)” is a story that proclaims just the opposite ... that we are never alone, never isolated, never forgotten, never neglected, and never without hope ... and we, just like Joseph and Mary ... learn and experience, if we are followers of the Child that we are called not just to tell the Story of *God saves-God with us* in the world, not just to bring the Story to the world, not just to dream about it ... but to engage so fully in life that we enact the Story, that we bring the Story to life ... and so dispel loneliness, isolation, neglect, and hopelessness for those we know and for those we have yet to meet.

As we will sing in the last verse of our second Hymn at Communion this morning:  
*Glory be to God the Father, glory be to God the Son, glory be to God the Spirit, glory to the Three in One. From the heart of blessed Mary, from all saints the song ascends, and the church the strain reechoes unto earth’s remotest ends.*

**Amen.**

*Deo Gratias (+)*  
*The Rev. Benjamin Larzelere III*  
*Pastor, Christ Lutheran Church*  
*Santa Fe, NM*

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<sup>1</sup> Credit is given to Professor William Loader, Murdoch University, Australia in his essay *The Birth Stories in Matthew: Emmanuel God With Us*.