

## “Emmanuel”

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First Presbyterian Church  
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**New Testament Lesson: Matthew 1:18-25**

**Old Testament Lesson: Jeremiah 23:5-6**

In one of her many short stories, Annie Dillard recalls a time long ago when she and her family returned home from dinner to a warm living room and their Christmas Eve celebration. Suddenly, “there was a commotion at the front door,” writes Dillard. “It opened, and cold wind blew around my dress. It was Santa Claus ..., looming in the doorway and looking around for me. My mother’s voice was thrilled: ‘Look who’s here!’ I ran upstairs. Like everyone in his right mind,” says Dillard, “I feared Santa Claus, thinking he was God.” Dillard concludes with an apology to God, saying, “I am sorry I ran from you.... For you meant only love ... and I felt only fear....”

One time long ago in Israel, love came to us incarnate, stood in the doorway between two worlds, and we were all afraid.<sup>1</sup> And I would say that in many ways today, we are still all afraid. Afraid of God’s love incarnate, enfleshed in Jesus, and in us.

Let’s face it folks, we are afraid to love as we should or as we could, if only we trusted in the Lord above all else. But before we get too hard on ourselves, you do realize this is part of the human condition? It’s why we have to have faith. Without faith, we couldn’t get through another day amid the brokenness of this world. In fact, our faith tells us that it is into this broken world that God did come, as love, incarnate.

“... An angel of the Lord appeared to ... Joseph, and said “son of David, do not be afraid...” 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.”

Our faith tells us to not be afraid to embrace love incarnate. Why are we afraid to do this – to welcome the fullness of Jesus into our lives and into our hearts? Why are we afraid to give to talk to a beggar on the streets, or to visit someone who is sick in the hospital, or to tithe 10% at church – got you with that one, didn’t I!?! A lot of our fears do revolve around money.

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<sup>1</sup> Annie Dillard, “God in the Doorway,” *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* [New York: Harper & Row, 1982], 137-39. Thanks to John M. Buchanan, “Keeping God at Arm’s Length,” *Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, Ill.*, 5 February 1995).

Is it really that we are afraid of God and what the Lord might do? Are we really afraid of what might happen if we offer mercy to the poor, comfort to the sick, and sacrificial giving to God? No. That's not what we are afraid of.

Like Joseph, we're not really afraid of God, or of God's love incarnate. What we are afraid of when God calls upon us, what Joseph was afraid of in hearing about Mary has more to do with us than with God. In fact, it was us who Joseph was afraid of – and when I say “us,” I mean society. Joseph was afraid of what people would say about Mary, about what we would say about an unwed mother and the blessing from God that she carried in her womb. A carpenter like Joseph would have risked his livelihood had he and Mary been shunned and ostracized by society. And surely as a devote Jew, Joseph was worried about what people would say, in God's name, about this baby conceived outside of wedlock.

But of course, we know what God says. God says, This is “Emmanuel, which means, ‘God is with us.’” And if God is with us, who can be against us?!? “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all – can we not trust such a God to give us, with him, everything else that we can need?” That's from Romans chapter 8 – an assurance that we don't have to be afraid to give of ourselves; that God is with us and wants only good for us. No matter what we or anyone else might think about how God's plans are unfolding, if God is for us, who can be against us?

There is a great line in the movie classic titled “We're No Angels” starring Humphrey Bogart. Three convicts escape from Devil's Island and arrive at a nearby French town. At first, they plan to steal their getaway supplies from a local storeowner, but something turns them in a different direction. They decide to stay and help the family get out from under their mean and selfish landlord. One of the characters, also named Joseph (played by Boggie), says at a point of divine weakness, “I'm going to buy them their Christmas turkey.” “Buy?” asks his convict buddy Albert. “Do you really mean buy?” “Yes, buy!” says Joseph. In the Spirit of Christmas. The hard part's going to be stealing the money to pay for it.”

Now surely God would not condone stealing. It's a joke. But the point is, God can take the brokenness of this world and turn it toward God's purpose. But how? Well, look at what God did with Joseph and his fear of the world around him.

Joseph isn't that different from you and me. He's not the star of God's plan, so to speak. Joseph has a supporting role. And yet, even in his supporting role, God gives Joseph the power to make things happen. Joseph could have continued with his plan to, as Matthew says, “Dismiss (Mary) quietly.” It's not even a bad plan.

If Mary were allowed to go off and have the child privately, she could have avoided society's judgment about being an unwed mother. And in Joseph's eyes, that was the kinder thing to do.

But in God's eyes, it was the fearful thing to do, and Joseph would have missed out on fulfilling his destiny. Joseph is the connection between what God had done long ago in Israel long ago and what God was about to do in Judea at that time. Through the Prophet Jeremiah, God promised to raise up a righteous branch in the line of David, and through his servant Joseph, God was ready to fulfill that promise. So what Joseph saw as a problem to be solved, God held as the first step for Joseph in reaching his God-given potential, that is, to be the link between what was and what is to come.

How many times do we hide behind popular, societal judgments and fears at the expense of fulfilling our God-given potential? Maybe you're called to venture out in a new direction – go back to school or get a different job. Maybe God would have you – or me – be the one to stand up for the underdog. Perhaps it is through you that God is waiting to bring someone into relationship with the Lord this Christmas; invite someone for our Christmas Eve Service.

Whatever it is for you that keeps coming to mind as a new idea, whatever challenge you've been avoiding for far too long, know that God is here to guide you through it, to bring you into a promised future of greater joy and fulfillment. As long as we are following the Spirit of the Lord, God is there for us, to ease our way. Sometimes our way is eased by the people whom God has put in our lives. Sometimes our way is eased over time. Sometimes the way is made easier when we turn in a new direction, despite our fears, despite uncertainties.

Both Joseph and Mary were asked to take on a new and extraordinary role in life – being parents. There's not a parent here who doesn't know how scary that is. And those of us who are not parents, we know how scary it is to give oneself to an uncertain future.

But we give ourselves over to it – whatever it is God has called us to. We accept the role God has given us in life and embrace it, trusting in God to guide us, to protect us, and to bless us.

We have faith to do this because long ago in Israel, God gave himself to us. In the birth of Christ, God's very being is given to us, and we respond to this gift by giving ourselves as a gift to the Christ child, the one called Emmanuel, God with us.

Through the birth of Jesus, God is coming to us in a new way, to do a new thing. As we go forth from this place today, let us pause to ask what gift we might give in response to the gift of Jesus.

In Jesus Christ, God has given himself to us. In Jesus Christ, let us give ourselves to one another, and to God. Amen.

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Bethlehem beckons to all of us O God, even to those who come reluctantly.

We offer our prayers for those who have been trampled upon during their journey. We pray that the life of this Holy child born in the darkness of night in the depth of winter might be a cause for hope in the dark winter of our lives.

We are bound for Bethlehem, O God. We journey to the stable in awe at this wondrous thing that is to happen.

Like Mary, let our souls magnify the Lord and let us kneel before the cradle in thanksgiving.

Bethlehem beckons and we come reverently with open hearts as we prepare to greet the babe.

Help us to receive the gift of love given to us in Jesus, that we might have life and have it abundantly.

Bethlehem beckons and we come to meet the Messiah, who taught us so much, and then summed it up in his prayer to you that we might all pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;  
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive  
our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,  
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**