

### **Matthew 1:18-25**

*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. 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; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.*

***"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."***

**In our gospel lesson today, we hear of Joseph's wrestling with his decision upon learning that Mary is pregnant while engaged to him. Does he follow the social custom of rejecting her and accusing her of adultery in front of the community? He shies from this cruel path, but cannot face remaining with her, so he plans to "dismiss her quietly", no accusations, but no chance to ever marry again, a life of shame and rejection.**

**But as Joseph snoozes after wrestling with his decision, a new path opens as an angel comes to him in a dream with that constant refrain of the Christmas story: Do not be afraid.**

**And with those words, Joseph sees a new way, staying with Mary, despite the ridicule he will receive from the community, joining her in the perilous path ahead and becoming the earthly father of Jesus and the steady protector of the newborn child and his mother.**

**Within this story we hear three names for Jesus, before he is even born.**

The opening line of the reading calls him Jesus the Messiah, messiah meaning “the chosen one”.

Second, Jesus means “he saves”, as the angel tells Joseph to accept Mary and that she will give birth to a son, “...and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

And then the third name, as the reading speaks of how the birth of Jesus will fulfill the prophecy that originates in our reading from Isaiah today.

*“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.’”*

Messiah, the chosen one.

Jesus, he saves.

And now, Emmanuel, God with us, the deeply comforting words of this season, as they echo through our hymn today, reminding us of God’s love with us, in the birth of Jesus.

God’s wild and outrageous love for humanity, as God drew near to us, in his Son Jesus.

Emmanuel, God with us.

Last summer while Tim and I were in Michigan we had a long breakfast with our dear friends Don and Carol, sitting outdoors on a beautiful sunny morning in Holland, Michigan.

Carol and I got to talking about cleaning out our homes, and how, though she and Don moved into a condominium several years ago, things still tend to accumulate! We connected too on our sense of urgency to deal with personal things we would not want others to clean out for us, especially things we would not want others to read, journals, letters, diaries.

I said I was working my way through journals from years past, when writing was a place to wrestle with the complexities and pain of family and relationships.

Carol said she had just finished going through her journals, noting that the rants and anguish and worries in her writings on children and grandchildren

were now gone. “Only travel diaries left now, only memories of sights and vacations”.

We firmly agreed, much on our shelves and in boxes was for our eyes only, and we did not want children and grandchildren to be both stuck with the clean-out task, and upset by the content of our private musings.

That task I started last summer with my journals, is finally almost done, worked on in fits and starts over the past months.

Some journals were easy to skim and toss, others pulled me in as I relived key events and looked back at decades of my life.

Too, as my call to ordained ministry began in my 20s, much of my writing includes my spiritual wrestling with understanding God, and how I was called to serve and help.

One entry from 1992 caught my attention and joined the small pile of must-save pages. In those few pages I found the roots of something I know, but so deeply needed to again be taught about myself, my call, and my ministry. Emmanuel, God with us.

At that time, I was working as a mental health counselor and I was deeply grieving the death of one of my clients by suicide.

All deaths can cause us to re-think and review our actions, wondering: “What if I had insisted on a second opinion, visited one more time, done this or this or that.”

This “what if-ing” is even more intense when a person dies by their own hand; we agonize over what we could have done differently, last conversations, missed phone calls.

As I did my own “what if-ing” after the death of my client, in the darkness and sadness, I came to a deeper understanding of God, of Emmanuel, God with us.

30 years ago I wrote:

“I have learned this week that I am not God, that I could not save (my client). I felt and feel very small and empty and finally in all this pain realized what people have meant when they suggest, empty yourself of your own ego and let God in; make room for God within you, not a corner of you, but within your core.

I realized that alone I can do nothing. I am not saying that if I had let God in more, I could have somehow saved my client. But to no longer walk alone on

my journey because basing my skills and self-confidence and self esteem all within me, is a false floor that will collapse under the weight of the tasks on my journey.”

Thirty years later, as I sat with these words written in darkness, I knew they were true and holy, but I must confess that I still often only allow God a corner of me, not my whole self, the core of my being. I struggle with my ego, my self-reliance, my leaning on myself only.

But I deeply recognize that false floor, that self-reliance, and know that I cannot bear the weight of life alone. I will and still do, fall through that seemingly strong foundation when the world gets heavy, when folks die, when I am weary, if I lean on me, I tumble again under the weight of the tasks on my journey.

Emmanuel, God with us.

I was amused to noticed in this old journal entry that I started it at 7:15am, and then picked it up again at 11:40pm that night! A lot has changed in 30 years!

But when I returned to it that night, my writing focused then on what I could do, my call. I wrote:

“I am not God and cannot solve the problems of the world or individuals. But I can be a planter of seeds, an example of a person letting God in, a spreader of pointless joy, which nourishes people and makes them more fertile ground for my seeds or others to grow in. But we all must do our own growing.”

I am not sure what I meant then by “pointless joy”, as I was as much of a workaholic then, as I am now. But I do know that creating joy with folks without telling them what to believe or do, does make our ground more ready to receive God’s love.

Emmanuel, God with us.

In our darkness, our grief, our joy, our hope. God with us, the solid floor on which we are called to build and serve and help, and where we can rest.

Amen.

