

Scripture and Sermon for December 18, 2016

Isaiah 7:10-16

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted."

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.

Let us pray...Amen.

Emmanuel. God with us. In the church year, we really only get a few short weeks to hear about and reflect upon the fact that God was with humanity in human form in the person of Jesus the Christ.

God didn't arrive on earth with trumpets and mighty horses accompanied by legions of warriors to conquer the Roman Empire. No, God arrived on earth through an unmarried pregnant woman who was with her fiancé; they had no money, they had no place to stay...and the Messiah, our Lord and Savior, the Christ Child, was born in a stable, amidst the barn smells and the animals. With no place to lay him, Mary placed the new-born baby in a manger, a small wooden contraption meant for feeding horses and cows.

Now, the birth of any baby is a miracle, and this birth was no exception. We have very little details about the birth, but most of us can imagine the pain Mary went through with her contractions, we can imagine Joseph's worry as he tried to help her give birth.

And when Jesus was born, when Emmanuel, 'God With Us' arrived, he arrived as a defenseless, helpless, hungry, and needy infant. Anonymous to the world, until the angels told the shepherds, and the star arrived to

mark the place of his birth, this baby only had some scraps of cloth and his mother's arms to protect him from the cold, the dust and dirt of the stable.

The branch of theology that concerns itself with the human side of Christ, the bodily presence of God among humanity is known as 'incarnational' theology. It means 'embodied', and for all of his divinity, all of us ministry and miracles, Jesus lived among us with a body, just like you and me. Just like our children, our grandchildren, our nieces and nephews, our neighbors and our friends.

I think there is some value in reflecting upon the idea that Jesus lived among us, in his human body, because God loved us so much that God wanted to experience what we experience.

As an infant, Jesus felt hunger when he was hungry, and relief when he was fed. He shivered when he was cold, and he snuggled when he was held by his mother or his father.

We're told that he was a quiet baby, no sounds did he make, but how likely is that? More likely he squalled when he was wet or needed to be changed, most likely he cried when he wanted to be fed.

For all his divine power, Jesus was as helpless as you and I were as infants. And that can tell us a lot about a God who wished to be among us.

We know very little about the Christ's childhood. The next story we have is when Jesus was about 12, and had disappeared from his parent's group as they made their way home. He was found in a synagogue, studying with the Rabbis, and seemed genuinely perplexed when his mother scolded him for worrying his parents.

Scolding the Messiah. Only nobody knew he was the Messiah. All the hullabaloo about his birth from the shepherds and wise men from the East

seemed to be forgotten. He wasn't a celebrity, or even particularly noticed...the gospels pick up the story when he was 30. So most of his childhood story is missing, as is his entire adolescence and early adulthood.

But we know enough about human development that if we were to imagine what Jesus would have been like as a toddler, as a pre-teen, as a teenager, as a young adult, we could probably come close to what he was really like.

Here's what we can imagine: that Jesus experienced bodily pain, just like we do. He probably had headaches, just like we do. He felt stomachaches, just like we do. If he helped his father in the carpentry business, he very likely had accidents, like we do, injuring his hands, or other parts of his body. He healed, just like we do.

Jesus experienced emotional pain, just like we do. He cried, like we do. His heart broke, just like ours break. Maybe, given his relationship with the Sacred, he had more empathy, more sympathy, more insight into the needs of others. Scripture tells us he cried when his friend Lazarus died. He was deeply touched with Mary Magdalene washed his feet with perfumed oil.

Whatever emotions we can feel in our lives, Jesus was able to feel in his own. There is no mention of Jesus ever being married, or falling in love. Scholars suggest that it would have been very unusual for a Rabbi to be unmarried, it was expected that they would. Some suggest that he and Mary Magdalene might have been a couple. It doesn't really matter, he most likely felt all kinds of love for those around him. Love for Mary, love for his mother and father, love for his friends, love for his disciples...

The important thing here is that he felt what you and I feel. He knew our pain before we felt it. He knew our joys before we experience them. God is not some far-removed, isolated deity that controls humanity like some toy train set. Our God live among us, and tasted good food, and spoiled food. Smelled perfume and animal dung. Fell asleep under a warm blanket, and felt the burn of a bee sting.

Incarnation. Embodied. God with us. A miracle of life, a sacred miracle for all of humanity.

Embarrassment, shame, anger, humor, sadness, joy, exasperation, confusion, satisfaction, awe, numbness...any emotion you can think of feeling, Jesus was capable of feeling. Anything you have felt in your life, Jesus could have felt in his own life.

Now, Jesus didn't live into his 70's or 80's, so arthritis, and the infirmities that come with aging might have been lost to him, but that doesn't matter; what matters is that Jesus lived into his body, and lived among the children of God, just like they lived.

As he developed his ministry, he began to understand and know more about those around him. He knew about humanity, not just because he was divine, but because he was human. Sometimes I think we forget that he was equally human and divine. We forget the lengths God went to in order to be among us.

It means a lot to me that Jesus felt the feelings I feel. That he experienced the pains that I experience.

His body was tortured near the end of his life. Every pain inflicted upon his body was felt, just like we would have felt it if we had been tortured. His restraint, his obedience, now those things were super human, but up

until his last moments, Jesus lived and breathed and existed just as we do today.

That just astounds me. I hope that it astounds you too. Time, distance, and modern life have all conspired to drive a wedge between the miracle of Emmanuel's birth on earth and our connection to him. But whatever you might be feeling today, whatever the emotional or physical state you might be in, Jesus has already felt it. Already experienced it. No, he didn't live his life exactly like we live ours, but that wasn't the point of the Creator God, was it?

The point was that God loved us so much that God wanted to dwell among us and feel what we feel, experience what we experience. That's a bold and risky move, and I think we forget, in the joy and celebration of the birth of Christ, that God took a big risk to live among us.

I take tremendous comfort in the idea that Jesus felt the way I feel, and that his sacrifice for me was something he felt deeply about. And because of that, I celebrate the coming of the Christ Child into the world a little bit differently this year.

I hope you will too. Amen.