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Matthew 1:18-25

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## GOD COMES NEAR

The days and months roll by and once again it's Christmas. Ah, Christmas. Many of the all-time, award-winning, suitable-for-sitcom arguments between my wife and me have taken place at Christmas. The chaos caused by two people who are completely out of energy trying to make the perfect family event. The expectations for this to be the most wonderful day of the year. The in-laws and outlaws and the desperate attempt to change the family dynamics that have become petrified for all time. The sadness of missing people you really want to be with, or a place you want to be in because of distance or tragic loss. Ah, Christmas: a day that brings no small amount of pressure.

But wasn't there a night long gone by when there were no pressures, no expectations, and no chaos? A night that could not have been more simple or plain, and yet it was anything but ordinary. A night when a young couple experienced incomprehensible mystery and unadulterated joy. A night when the heavenly chorus of angels obliterated the sound barrier and no gift could have been more extravagant or timely. A night when a baby boy was born in obscurity and the world has not been the same since.

Christmas is next Saturday. By Sunday, most of you will be so depleted from trying to do too much, seeking to please too many and recover from the shock of spending too much money that you will lie on the couch all day in your pajamas, watching movies and football games. So for a moment this morning let us contemplate Advent. And let us pray that we might experience at least for a moment the divine mystery, the unencumbered joy, the heart-stopping heavenly chorus, and the most extravagant gift ever given.

Advent comes the Latin word *adventus*, or coming. Today is the fourth Sunday of Advent and next Sunday is Christmas Sunday according to the traditional church calendar. The season looks to the past and proclaims the coming of Christ in the birth of Jesus. And it looks to the present, for the truth is that Jesus continues to come again and again to any heart that is open to receive him. And it looks to the future, when God will come again in glory and power to establish his kingdom once and for all: a new heavens and a new earth where there will be no more suffering, tears or death. According to one writer, Advent is "the season of the Coming, that we rise up on tiptoe to dance. We open our throats to sing and to proclaim this vigil that we keep."<sup>1</sup> Another has written, "Advent is like the hush in a theater just before the curtain rises. It is like the

hazy ring around the winter moon that means the coming of snow which will turn the night to silver."<sup>2</sup>

Our text is from the opening chapter of Matthew's gospel.

**Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly. But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel," which translated means, "God with us." And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus. (Matt 1:18-25 NASB)**

Last week, Bernard Bell took us through Luke's account of the annunciation and the Magnificat, which declares the greatness of God. In that text the angel told Mary that the child would be called the Son of the Most High. In Matthew's account the angel told Joseph that "the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel," which translated means, "God with us."

At Christmas we celebrate God's invasion into humanity, his entrance in humility, and his declaration in clarity to be with us. The mystery of Advent is that God became a man to be with us. But what does it mean for God to be with us? Let me suggest a few things to reflect on this morning.

### The advent of Jesus proclaims that salvation has come

The quotation in Matthew 1:23 is from Isaiah 7:14. In the days of Isaiah the name Immanuel was given to a child not yet conceived, with the promise that the danger then threatening Israel from Syria and Samaria would pass "before the boy will know enough to refuse evil and choose good" (Isa 7:16). Thus, the child and his name are signs of God's gracious, saving presence among his people. The angel who spoke with Joseph saw the birth of Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14. And the

saving act will be that this child will save his people from their sins.

Jesus didn't come as Santa Claus, he came as Savior of the world. God's entrance into humanity is God's saving presence from sin and law and death. God's appearing as Immanuel means life, a life that cannot be grasped apart from God entering into the human picture. "In Him was life" (John 1:4). God came to us because we could not go to him.

The amazing thing is that God's salvation came in the form of a child. This is not how Hollywood would portray it. The movie version would have a major star playing the part. They would run trailers for weeks on television and plastered posters on every billboard and bus. The hit song would be playing on our radios in advance. But God came in obscurity as an infant.

Advent tells us that salvation has arrived, but it also tells us how we are to embrace our salvation. We embrace this new life in the same way that we reach out to a newborn—in humility, wonder, awe and delight. Without fanfare we fall on our knees and receive this Son into our hearts. God gives us the greatest gift of all—our salvation. Immanuel means that God came to us, he came for us.

### **The coming of Jesus assures us that he will come again in glory**

God's people had been eagerly anticipating the arrival of the Messiah. They thought he would correct every injustice and set the world right. The Messiah came, but not in the way they had hoped. He brought salvation.

But there is one more act in the drama that God has been unfolding since creation. God will come again, this time in glory, and establish his kingdom for all eternity. Tennyson wrote:

Thou wilt not leave us in the dust;  
Thou madest man, he knows not why,  
He thinks he was not made to die;  
And thou hast made him: thou art just.

*(In Memoriam, A.H.H.)*

We were made for eternity. We long to share in the glory of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Even the creation longs for the revelation of the sons of God as it waits eagerly for the new heavens and the new earth (Romans 8). And so we wait. We long for and anticipate the final scene in the play. Advent tells us that this too is coming.

Writing about Christmas, Brennan Manning, one of my favorite authors, said,

Christmas is the promise that the God who came in history and comes daily in mystery will one day come in glory. God is saying in Jesus that in the end everything will be all right. Nothing can harm you permanently, no suffering is irrevocable, no loss is lasting, no defeat is more than transitory, no disappointment is conclusive. Jesus did not deny the real-

ity of suffering, discouragement, disappointment, frustration, and death; he simply stated that the Kingdom of God would conquer all of these horrors, that the Father's love is so prodigal that no evil could possibly resist it.<sup>3</sup>

### **The coming of Jesus makes it clear that God is not distant**

Some people think of God as an abstract idea, a spiritual concept, a philosophical way of thinking or a fairy tale. They might acknowledge his existence, but he is not personal to them in any way. Others think of God as someone out there without heart or feeling who pulls the strings of human lives in a capricious way, hiding himself from humanity like the Wizard of Oz.

Even in the Old Testament God seems to be a moving target who speaks with garbled utterances through angels and prophets. Prior to the birth of Jesus, God had been silent for 400 years, since the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. God's people were waiting, hoping for a word. And then God spoke and "The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). God moved into the neighborhood. After the ascension, Jesus continues to dwell among us through the Spirit. He told his disciples "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt 28:20). This has always been God's promise to his people: I am with you. I will not leave you. I am here for you.

At times I hear people say what I have said myself on occasion: God seems so far away. I don't feel close to him at all. Some of you here this morning are dying inside. You think that God does not care about you. You see no evidence of him in your life. The mention of his name means nothing more to you than the mention of the name of an uncle you haven't seen in 30 years. God seems distant and unapproachable. He doesn't seem to care.

But the truth is that God is closer to you than you think. He is as close to you as the person sitting next to you. In fact, maybe Jesus is the person sitting next to you. Advent reminds us that God is here. He is near. He is approachable. We are encouraged to keep looking for him and listening for his presence, his holy invasion into our lives and the lives of those around us. You probably won't find him at Macys or Bloomingdales. But you will find him in some out of the way place, like a stable in Bethlehem. If you are silent long enough, you might feel him tapping you on the shoulder.

### **The coming of Jesus means that light will prevail over darkness**

"Arise, shine; for your light has come,  
And the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.  
For behold, darkness will cover the earth  
And deep darkness the peoples;  
But the LORD will rise upon you  
And His glory will appear upon you." (Isa 60:1-2)

The effects of a fallen humanity are apparent all around us: war and crime, hatred and self-serving ambition. Sometimes the dark clouds settle within us and stay for a very long time. The darkness without and within can overwhelm us and we lose hope.

But John the apostle tells us that “in Him (Jesus) was life, and the life was the Light of men. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend (overcome) it” (John 1:4-5). Advent reminds us that no matter how dark the darkness, the light of Christ will arise and prevail. “God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). Jesus is the light of the world. He told his disciples, “he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life” (John 8:12). Jesus is the light of God with us, giving us hope and saving us from despair.

Consider the anguished pain of Jeremiah and Job who cursed the day they were born. Think about David’s pain as he was in hiding in isolation, pursued by Saul. Imagine the loneliness of Moses and Paul as God broke them and stripped them in the wilderness so that they would depend on him only. God was always with them and the darkness did not overcome them.

A couple of years ago when I was facing a very dark time in my life, God gave me a friend who didn’t preach to me or give me advice or try to fix me. He was just with me. He listened. He was with me in the way that God is with me. The circumstances did not change immediately, but his presence was a glimpse of light that gave me hope.

Sometimes my wife will look at me and without saying a word know exactly what I am thinking. She will detect that I am being assaulted with doubt or insecurity or grief. She will smile at me or reach across and take hold of my hand and the darkness will not seem so dark.

And occasionally I will sense the presence of the One who came and who will come again. He does what a friend or a spouse does. He doesn’t preach at me. He doesn’t fix the circumstances. He sits next to me. He puts his arm around me. His light dispels the darkness and his presence unleashes a life-giving power. Immanuel, God with us, even in the darkness.

## **The coming of Jesus reveals the heart and the nature of God**

John tells us that “the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth...No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him” (John 1:14, 18). Paul said that Jesus “is the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15)

Jesus explained the Father. He said that when people saw Jesus, they saw the Father; when they heard him, they heard the Father. Jesus did what his Father did and said what his Father said. We learn to know what God is like through looking at the Son. So we can talk about God in human terms.

When we look at Jesus we see a heart of compassion that pours out grace and mercy and forgiveness towards those who come in sin and brokenness. He does give a stern word to those who justify themselves with religious activities. But for those who come in weakness he opens his arms wide. He yearns for us and longs for us to be part of his family. He wants us to come home no matter what the time of day, no matter how long we have been gone. God’s grace always trumps his judgment. Jesus reveals God and his love towards us. When we look into the face of the Christchild we see the love of God.

When I look at a newborn something wonderful wells up in my heart. I feel a warmth that wasn’t there a minute ago. I can be in the middle of a crowded restaurant and see a little infant across the room and my heart will melt. I will say to my wife, “Oh, look at the baby!” Christmas is when we look at the face of a baby and see the love of God for us.

My favorite Christmas story is *The Gift of the Magi*, by O. Henry. The story recalls the Christmas gift exchange of a recently married young couple. Because they are struggling to get by, they have no extra money to buy each other Christmas presents. Secretly, each of them plans to bless the other with a surprise. The young husband hopes to buy a set of elegant tortoise shell combs for his wife’s beautiful long hair. She in turn wants to purchase a fob chain for the gold watch which is his treasure. Since neither has the money to buy these extravagant gifts, each plans to sacrifice something precious to get the needed funds. The wife sells her beautiful long hair, while the husband sells his watch. What they quickly discover is that their real gift to one another is the gift of love.

This is what God gives in Jesus—his love. And it is love that slowly transforms us to be like God.

And you, high eternal Trinity,  
acted as if you were drunk with love,  
infatuated with your creature.  
When you saw that his tree could bear no fruit  
but the fruit of death  
because it was cut off from you who are life,  
you came to its rescue  
with the same love with which you had created it:  
you grafted your divinity into the dead tree of our hu-  
manity  
O sweet tender engrafting!

You sweetness itself, stooped to join yourself with our bit-  
terness.  
You splendor, joined yourself with darkness;  
you, wisdom, with foolishness;  
you, life, with death;  
you, the infinite, with us who are finite.  
What drove you to this  
to give back life to this creature of yours  
That had so insulted you?  
Only love, as I have said,

and so by this engrafting, death is destroyed.

– Catherine of Siena (1347-1380)

Thou Son of the Most High, Prince of Peace, be born again into our world. Wherever there is war in this world, wherever there is pain, wherever there is loneliness, wherever there is no hope, come, thou long-expected one, with healing in thy wings.

Holy Child, whom the shepherds and the kings and the dumb beasts adored, be born again. Wherever there is boredom, wherever there is fear of failure, wherever there is temptation too strong to resist, wherever there is bitterness of heart, come, thou blessed one, with healing in thy wings.

Savior, be born in each of us who raises his face to thy face, not knowing fully who he is or who thou art, knowing only that thy love is beyond his knowing and that no other has the power to make him whole. Come, Lord Jesus, to each who longs for thee even though he has forgotten thy name. Come quickly.

Amen.<sup>4</sup>

1. Wendy M. Wright, *The Vigil* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1992), 16.

2. *Listening to Your Life*, Daily Meditations with Frederick Buechner, compiled and edited by George Connor (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 315.

3. Brennan Manning, *Reflections for Ragamuffins*, quoted in *A Guide to Prayer for All Who Seek God* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2003), 26.

4. Buechner, *Listening to Your Life*, 341.

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