

*MISSING THE POINT*  
FOR WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, GREENVILLE, SC  
17 DECEMBER 2023 | ADVENT III  
MATTHEW 1:16, 18-25

*You've heard it before. Now I encourage you to listen:*

... <sup>16</sup>and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

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

<sup>23</sup> 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel',

which means, 'God is with us.' <sup>24</sup>When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup>but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

*The word of the Lord, thanks be to God.*

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We only spent one Christmas on my grandparent's farm in Due West. For the first time in all of our childhoods, the aunts gathered. We came up from Columbia, my mother's older sister and her four came down from Annapolis, and her younger sister and their two came over from Atlanta. The house was full.

Now Due West is one of those places that grows in your memory. It is covered over in warm hues and the feeling of being loved, speckled with cows and a smell that you only know if you've set foot in the Due West Hardware Supply. And this particular Due West Christmas, when I was about 11 or 12, is imprinted in my memory forever.

I'm sure you have those. You remember when you got the bike or the Barbie dream house, when your dad handed you the keys to the car. You remember when everything fell together perfectly.

I should be specific. This was not that.

Because Santa, in the year of our Lord 1990-something made a critical misstep. Santa didn't coordinate with the sisters.

So it is on Christmas morning, in a humble farm house full of love and food that would make you swoon I found myself three gifts shy of what my cousins got. And not only that.

It wasn't just the number, it was the presentation too.

For whatever reason when the gifts were dropped off for my older cousins they came with an elaborate scavenger hunt. When found, were immaculately wrapped. My younger cousins gifts weren't wrapped but they were shiny — shinier than mine. And quantifiably greater. I, preening on the edge of puberty, got a stocking full of deodorants and soaps. Santa's elves sewed me some Fruit of the Loom that I'm pretty sure fell under the category "necessity," more so than "extravagance."

To be clear, I got plenty of gifts that Christmas, more than the hygiene kit and under-things, but I couldn't help but notice that my cousins got more, and that their wrapping was more elaborate, and that my matte finishes were not as polished as their chrome.

Aghast, I stormed off to the living room where there sat an out of tune piano and a lovely nativity set and for 30 minutes I broodingly played the only thing I knew: F and F#, over and over and over. The two notes in *Jaws* that let you know the shark is near.

That Christmas morning I transformed into a pubescent emotional Christmas shark, chomping away joy until someone brought out the Yule Log and chocolate began to melt my jealousy.

Now on the one hand I was right. In all of his infinite wisdom, Santa may still should have coordinated among the sisters. But it occurs to me — thirty years after the lecture I received on gratitude, thirty years after and my grandparents sat me down to read the very-same story I just read:

*that I missed the point.*

Blinded by the chrome and the scavenger hunt and the smell of a stocking full of Degree, I flailed to understand why we were all there, gathered like the multitudes to witness to this great story and celebrate the love that lies wrapped in fragile vulnerability at the heart of Incarnation.

But when it comes to Christmas it seems to me that I'm not the only one — I stand in a long line of folks who have, whether they realized it or not, *missed the point*.

After all the Catholic and Protestant churches have been in a 500-year-long debate about Mary. The church has spilled gallons of ink arguing about the conception of Jesus and the *status* of Mary, which, it seems to me, tells us more about our fixation with who is sleeping with whom than it does about Mary and the miracles of God —

It suggests to me that we have, as an ecclesiastical body,  
for the last five centuries  
*missed the point.*

And that's not the only Christmas argument that consume church and culture: there are ultra orthodox Protestants — right here in Greenville — who have made the virgin conception so critically important to their faith that they would assert that anyone who questions it cannot claim to be a Christian. There are those who may say that the immaculate conception is as central as the resurrection.

Arguing with those folks are Christians schooled in modern historical criticism who hang their hats on translation, reminding their orthodox siblings that the Isaiah text we read today, the one Matthew quotes in the dream revelation to Joseph, does not talk about virginity at all, but rather about “a young woman” who will give birth as a sign of something great to come. So it is that in arguing about Mary we’ve managed to turn this transformative story into an debate about biblical literalism. And I wonder, as we holler about translation and tradition, *are we missing the point?*

Oh but that’s not all, because ours is a culture that is perpetually geared for a fight. Pundits rage about about taking the Christ out of Christmas, missing the critical fact that all those folks who replace “Christ” with an “X” are, in fact, using an ancient symbol that represents the Messiah — the Greek letter *chi*, the first letter of the Greek “Christos,” which of course means “Messiah,” a word repeated five times in Matthew’s first chapter alone.

We worry about taking Christ out of Christmas,  
or about the excesses of it all,  
or about decorating before Thanksgiving,  
or taking down the decorations before Epiphany.  
We worry about Starbucks cups,  
and rage when our siblings who don’t look like us ask for some representation  
in mangers and at the North Pole.  
We argue about church politics and our own.  
Our mothers and aunts don’t coordinate with cosmic powers about the plans on  
Christmas morning.

And I wonder,  
as the theme from *Jaws* flashes through my memory,  
*if we’re missing the point.*

Joseph is a good man. Forget the social scandal of a partner who becomes pregnant before a marriage contract is ratified, the pregnancy violates Levitical law. The text says that Joseph is a “righteous” man. That word carries many meanings, but its most basic suggests that he keeps Jewish law. He understands — surely with great sadness, with dashed hopes, with crushed expectations — that his marriage cannot proceed.

But being a good man — who understands not only the letter of the law, but also its intent — he does not seek to punish poor Mary, whose pregnancy so scandalizes their faith, only to dismiss her quietly. Having resolved to do so, he falls into one of Scripture’s best known dreams

Surely this is not how law-abiding, righteous, good Joseph expected to meet their God. But perhaps it is precisely here — halfway through the sermon, halfway through the text — that we begin to see the point that we’ve been missing all along.

In the dream, the messenger of the Lord loosely quotes a prophecy from Isaiah. Isaiah is speaking to Israel’s King about this-or-that, and offers as a sign the birth of a child by a young woman. Between the Greek and the Hebrew there are important differences, but there’s a critical similarity I’d like you to hang on to.

The Hebrew — our first Scripture reading for the morning — read thusly: “*Behold the young girl is with child and will give birth to a son, and she will call his name Emmanuel.*”

Greek translators seeking to bring the Hebrew to Greek-speaking Jews in the generation before Matthew kicked off two millennia of debate with what they changed, but the heart of the prophecy remained: “Behold the *virgin* will conceive and will give birth to a son, and *you* will call his name Emmanuel.”

Then Matthew came along and gave Isaiah’s words his own spin, “Behold the *virgin* will be with child and will give birth to a son, and *they* will call his name Emmanuel.”

*What doesn’t change in all that?* There’s the young girl dilemma, that gets muddied. Each text changes who will name him (she will in Hebrew, you will in the first Greek translations, they will (that’s us) in Matthew)...but what remains the same?

It’s right there at the end. The text builds toward it, in both Hebrew and Greek.

*Emmanuel.  
God with us.*

Joseph, the righteous, law-abiding man, caught in near-catastrophe, catches a glimpse of God in his dream. But that’s only a fraction of what will come. That’s only a bit of the story. Later he will have the high honor of seeing God lying in his mothers arms, of naming him Jesus — an act, by the way, that brings Jesus into the lineage of Joseph, thereby making him a son of the great King David.

Joseph hears God in a dream.  
And Joseph will get to cradle God  
and tend to God.  
God sees it fit to make a home in Joseph’s life.

And that’s what we miss when we argue about gifts and Starbucks cups and the relative merit of colored bulbs (superior). The thing that carries from Isaiah to Matthew to Joseph’s adoring arms, to us.

*Emmanuel. God with us.*

You may think it’s impossible.  
*We shall call him God with us.*  
But it’s the most natural thing for *our* God.  
*Precisely who God has revealed God to be. Not some abstraction.*  
*But a deity full of love.*  
Who from self-sufficient eternity

chose to turn to us,  
to open relationship with us,  
from love to create a world  
for us  
and for the fish of the sea  
and the angels of Bethlehem  
and the shepherds who watched their fields  
and the cows who grazed in my grandfathers  
and the blow ups of Parkins Mill  
and the kids over in Pleasant Valley  
and you  
and me.

*God with us.*

Here at Christmas we proclaim this entirely-possible thing: that the God who from eternity spun creation into being, chose to make this earth his home, and seeks even now by the power of the Spirit, to be at home once again, to be *Emmanuel* with us and for us

if only,  
if only,

we who are righteous would stop being so right, stop missing the point and receive divine presence as a daily reality, that both judges and affirms, corrects and comforts, and finally guides us into the Kingdom over which he will reign forever.

The odd thing about the name “Emmanuel” is that it never appears in Matthew again. But perhaps that’s because it’s not a name at all. It’s a reality.

Once the veil has been ripped,  
God enfleshed,  
lying in a manger,  
hanging on a cross,  
tending to a garden outside of an empty tomb,  
nothing is the same.

And when we forget that  
or act like God is some distant judge  
who doesn’t care how we act  
or what we we do,  
who doesn’t mind how we treat our neighbors  
or spend our money,  
we forget the most basic reality that Christmas longs to recall in us:  
*Emmanuel.*

God is here with us  
from a manger in Bethlehem  
to a street-corner in Greenville.

Heck, we say it time and again in worship, though you may miss it if you aren't looking. Here at Westminster have the tremendous honor of celebrating baptisms almost every week. By now many of y'all have gotten used to watching us parade down the aisle with one of God's own in our arms as you sing the familiar verse from "Baptized in Water." And I imagine that many of you could recite the liturgy alongside us. "Hear the Words of Our Lord Jesus Christ...All authority in heaven and earth yada yada yada." Do you remember what the liturgist says just before the act of baptism? The promise that launches us into the sacrament? It's a direct quotation from Matthew's gospel, the final thing he says to his disciples after the resurrection —

*remember,  
I am with you,  
always.*

*Remember.  
Emmanuel.  
Always.*

At the beginning of the gospel the angel tells us the point:  
God has made his home here.

At the end of the Gospel that God, all grown up, having been through hell for us and for our salvation, reminds us:

*I am with you  
Emmanuel  
Till the end.*

What if, in all of our raging, all of our blinking lights, all of our joy, all of the blues we'd rather not mention but often cannot forget we held on to that — God is with us, despite, because, alongside, in the midst of — what if that's the point?

God made God's home among us.

In our anxiety, like Joseph,  
in our joy, like John,  
in our wildest hopes, like Mary,  
we are called to look for that God,  
who from love made us,  
and in love dwells among us.

Lillian Miller, who's in our 4K program at the Weekday School and is active in WPC Kids, wrote — or perhaps dictated — Thursday's advent devotional. It's a good one. She briefly tells the story of Mary and Jesus, hitting on the great theme of love. But what drew me in is her ending.

“That’s it.” she writes, “There’s no more.”

Emmanuel. God with us.

*That’s it.*

*There’s no more.*

*And there’s no less either.*

Thanks be to God.

— *Leigh Stuckey*