

Grace and peace to each of you in the name of the coming One, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen

Let me begin out in left field. I am wondering how many of you have been reading the daily devotions from our First Lutheran Advent Devotional Booklet. I certainly have...and in the process, I have been reminded what gifted writers and insightful theologians we have among us. It has been a delight, in particular, to see what most of you writers have done with texts from the Old Testament. Attempting to make sense of Christ's coming through the lens of an Old Testament text is not the easiest thing to do. But, by and large, you've made the connection between Old Testament hopes and Advent preparations with wisdom, clarity and nuance. So, a hearty word of thanks to all of you writers from the whole congregation...well done!

Now, I have brought this to your attention because St. Matthew has done the same kind of connecting in his account of the life of Jesus. More than any other gospel writer, Matthew overtly links his Jesus story line with the Old Testament story line. Quite frequently, Matthew has written: "This...or that... took place in order to fulfill what was written by the prophet Isaiah or Jeremiah..."

That's exactly what happens in today's text from the first chapter of Matthew. In extremely succinct fashion, Matthew begins his story by telling of Mary's engagement to Joseph, her surprising pregnancy by the Holy Spirit, Joseph's plan to divorce her quietly, the dream in which Joseph learns the true nature of Mary's pregnancy, and the angel's admonition to Joseph: "You are to name Mary's son Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

Then, Matthew makes this connection: "All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Behold, the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call his name Emmanuel, which means, 'God with us!'"

Clearly, Matthew's intention was to connect the birth of the Christ child with the assurance given to King Ahaz some 800 years earlier...the assurance that a new day of peace and security would be coming soon. As a sign to King Ahaz, Isaiah spoke of a young girl, probably known to Ahaz, a girl who was already pregnant and who would give birth soon. Isaiah promised that a son would be born to the young girl and that this boy was to be named Emmanuel, "God with us." The promised birth of that baby boy and his new name Emmanuel ("God with us!") was Isaiah's way of telling Ahaz not to worry in the face of an imminent attack from Syria and Israel. Don't be afraid, King Ahaz, God will be with you and peace is at hand!

With all of that in mind, Matthew makes the connection and envisions the birth of Jesus to be the culmination of these hopes from the past as well as the fulfillment of 1st century hopes in Israel and as well as a promise of peace to the entire world for all time. What Isaiah foresaw as a new era to come, Matthew saw as present in Jesus...for all time.

Some 20 centuries later, Jesus continues to be the incarnation of God's presence among us. Throughout his life and ministry, Jesus revealed God's true character to us and redeemed us from our sins.

- In Jesus' acts of compassion and grace, we see Emmanuel, "God with us."
- In Jesus' call for justice and mercy, we hear the voice of Emmanuel, "God with us."

- In his fearless confrontation with the rich and the powerful, Pharisees, Roman officials, religious leaders of all types, Jesus models what it means to be Emmanuel, “God with us!”
- Through his death on the cross, we are redeemed by Emmanuel, “God with us.”

For me, the takeaway from this brief birth story from Matthew is that we of the church...we who have been called to be disciples of Jesus...we are called to be signs in the world that Emmanuel has come to bring peace, justice and pardon. We are called to be Emmanuel people. Before we identify ourselves in any other way, we would do well to acknowledge that we are, first and foremost, Emmanuel people. Arland Hultgren, New Testament Professor Emeritus at Luther Seminary has gone so far as to claim that every Christian congregation worth its salt ought to be named “Emmanuel Christian Church.”

All of this is more significant than you might think. In the midst of a world gone crazy, Emmanuel people have an important role to play. In an age of increasing tension, polarity and hopelessness, people who believe that “God is with us!” will be more important than ever before. In the midst of the rise of anti-Semitism, neo-naziism, economic exploitation, fake news, hate crimes, xenophobia, sexism and greed, Emmanuel people are just what the doctor ordered.

As we celebrate Advent and wait for next Sunday’s birthday party, we must not forget that there is work to be done. Emmanuel people cannot rest on their laurels or their sentimental remembrances of a little baby born in Bethlehem. Emmanuel people are called to be vigilant, active and fearless...just as God is vigilant, active and fearless. For example,

- Emmanuel people must fight laws that line the pockets of the rich and cripple the poor.
- Emmanuel people must sound the alarm with regard to the need to steward our planet’s resources wisely.
- Emmanuel people must embrace an ethic of welcoming and caring for the neighbor...defending them from all who would demean or marginalize or malign them.
- Emmanuel people must stand against misogyny, homophobia, bullying and hate crimes.

The list goes on and on, but the point is that Emmanuel people must be little Christs in the world...reminding everyone with ears to hear and eyes to see that God is with us all...that God lives among us...that God has redeemed us from the powers of darkness and evil and is actively working to restore the face of the earth.

Well that’s enough. As I look back upon what I’ve just said, I fear that may have taken a few liberties with this morning’s birth narrative. But as I see it, this text stands as a challenge to remember with vigor and confidence that “God is indeed with us!”...and that the time has come to actively affirm that we really believe what we say we believe as Christians.

Let us pray:

Stir us up, O Lord, and make us the Emmanuel people you have created us to be. Give us strength and courage, good will and joy, compassion and forgiveness. Send us out to remind the world that God is with us all! Amen

