

Name Him “God With Us” by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. A4041219
Romans 1:1-7 and Matthew 1:18-25
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This has been a crazy week. We have seen pictures of bombings in Baghdad, heard the questioning of a drug approved to relieve pain for arthritis sufferers, heard the news of the death of one of our newest church members, and watched the days grow shorter and the weather colder. There seems little about which to be joyful.

Yet, we come to this place to see and hear something different. Red flowers blush their life in the chancel. Candles give off light and warmth. We sing songs: O come, Emmanuel— God with us! We have Christmas parties and go caroling. Perhaps we followers of Jesus are crazy too.

We live life with a hope and a promise in spite of what happens in the world around us. Perhaps we can do seemingly crazy things because we know our position is no different than that of shepherds, wise men, or an age-disparate couple who were awaiting the birth of a baby. The shepherds knew that their social position was at the bottom rung of society. They had no voice in halls of government. The wisemen were foreigners— aliens who were used as tools of the one in power. The old man and pregnant young woman were a social oddity. You can imagine what the people were saying about this old man as they wagged their fingers at him.

The baby promised was named “Emmanuel, God is with us.” How is God with us? Perhaps it is a joke. In the winter of 1926, Thelma Goldstein from Chicago treated herself to her first real vacation in Florida. Being unfamiliar with the area, she wandered into a restricted hotel in North Miami. "Excuse me," she said to the manager. "My name is Mrs. Goldstein, and I'd like a small room for two weeks."

"I'm awfully sorry," he replied, "but all of our rooms are occupied." Just as he said that, a man came down and checked out.

"What luck," said Mrs. Goldstein. "Now there's a room."

"Not so fast, Madam. I'm sorry, but this hotel is restricted. No Jews allowed."

"Jewish? Who's Jewish? I happen to be Catholic."

"I find that hard to believe. Let me ask you, who was the Son of God?"

"Jesus, Son of Mary."

"Where was he born?"

"In a stable."

"And why was he born in a stable?"

"Because a guy like you wouldn't let a Jew rent a room in his hotel!"

It is a different world. This isn't 1926. This is 2004, 78 years later. No longer are people allowed to legally discriminate against others on the basis of religion or skin color, and in most places, their sexual orientation. God is with us, helping people of faith make small but significant changes in the ways in which we act toward each other.

Let's refocus on that couple that was denied room in the inn. It was an age-disparate couple: an old Joseph and a young Mary. Mary was pregnant contrary to the social and religious conventions of her time. Joseph's proper role was to divorce, or put away his betrothed because she was pregnant but not by Joseph. He should have divorced her in order to save face. He could have had her stoned to death. If he were operating according to the law, the strict letter of the law, Joseph would have had her put to death. Joseph resolved to “dismiss her quietly.”

He reached that conclusion on his own, because he was kind and he was just. But the story says, he received a word— Now he was no longer on his own.

“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."¹

This is a confusing dream. Was Joseph supposed to name the baby “Jesus” or “Emmanuel?” Jesus means: Jahweh saves: “God saves.” Emmanuel means, “God is with us.” Which name was Joseph supposed to give this baby?

The angel was making reference to a prophecy by the Eighth Century BC Isaiah. Matthew’s purpose in writing this Gospel was to show the Jewish world that all of their hopes for a Messiah were fulfilled in the birth and life of this Jesus of Nazareth. The Eighth Century Isaiah spoke to the stubborn king Ahaz who refused to have faith that God was in control of things. He said, in effect, “Ahaz, don’t be such a blockhead. A woman, (probably Isaiah’s wife,) is pregnant, and the baby will be called, Emmanuel, God is with us.”²

Joseph was told to name this baby “Jesus” — God saves. The salvation that Jesus will bring also reveals his identity: Emmanuel, “God with us.” This is the heart of Matthew’s Gospel.

John Shelby Spong says, “Emmanuel” is the first christological term— the first theological statement about who Jesus was— in the gospel, and it is also the last one: “Remember that I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt. 28:20).

Because God is with us, we don’t have to be afraid of missiles, bombs, or terrorists, of auto accidents, days getting shorter, or death itself. God saves, and God is with us, and God can change us.

The words of letter to the Romans were written by Paul. Paul was a very zealous believer in God. He was so zealous, he engaged in the murder of those he thought unfaithful. But God is with us. Paul was converted: turned around by a coming face to face with God. So he could now understand and proclaim an unbroken plan of salvation from the law, through the prophets, and continuing in Jesus Christ.

God is with us, even when our world may seem to be falling apart. Because God is with us, even when things are bleak, we know God understands.

Because God is with us, we know that the one who acted in the lives of our ancestors acts in our world today.

Because God is with us, we have the courage to answer God’s call, as Mary and Joseph did.

We know the days will begin growing longer— we have faith, because God is with us.

We know there will one day be peace between Iraq and the rest of the world—we have faith, because God is with us.

We know there will one day be peace between political parties— we have faith, because God is with us.

We have faith because of God’s love, shown in the birth of a baby 2000 years ago. We must live with the faith in which we have lit our four Advent candles. Merry Christmas

¹Matthew 1:20-23

²A paraphrase of Isaiah 7:13-14