

Be Amazed...God Among Us

Matthew 2:1-2, 9-23

Welcome to a new year. Here we are at the second Sunday in Christmas. How time has flown since we first entered Advent. We heard the angel speak to Zechariah foretelling the birth of John the Baptist. We heard the angels speak to both Joseph and Mary, telling them to name their son Jesus. We celebrated Christ's birth at our Christmas Eve service. Now as time wears on we learn of more angels and more messages, and more danger.

As I was doing research in preparation for this morning's message, I came across the same story in at least two different settings. I have learned that when something in the Bible is repeated it means we are to pay attention to it, I took that as a sign that perhaps this was a story for us to hear today. It goes like this:

The late theologian Mike Yaconelli, told the story about a deacon in his church who wasn't deaking. He just didn't do what he was supposed to do as a deacon.

One day Yaconelli said to the deacon, "I have a group of young people who go to the old folks home and put on a worship service once a month. Would you drive them to the old folks home?" The deacon agreed. The first Sunday at the old folks home, the deacon

was in the back with his arms folded as the kids were doing their thing up front. All of a sudden, someone was tugging at his arm. He looked down, and here was this old man in a wheelchair. He took hold of the old man's hand and the old man held his hand all during the service. The next month that was repeated. The man in the wheelchair came and held the hand of the deacon. The next month, the next month, and the next month.

Then the old man wasn't there. The deacon inquired and he was told, "Oh, he's down the hall, right hand side, third door. He's dying. He's unconscious, but if you want to go down and pray over his body that's all right." The deacon went and there were tubes and wires hanging out all over the place. The deacon took the man's hand and prayed that God would receive the man, that God would bring this man from this life into the next and give him eternal blessings. As soon as he finished the prayer, the old man squeezed the deacon's hand, and the deacon knew that he had been heard. He was so moved by this that tears began to run down his cheeks.

He stumbled out of the room and as he did so he bumped into a woman. She said, "He's been waiting for you. He said that he didn't want to die until he had the chance to hold the hand of Jesus one more time." The deacon was amazed at this. He said, "What do you mean?" She said, "Well, my father would say that once a

month Jesus came to this place. ‘He would take my hand, and he would hold my hand for a whole hour. I don’t want to die until I have the chance to hold the hand of Jesus one more time.’” (from Homiletics, December 2004)

Be amazed...God is among us!

Each Christmas season I look forward to singing “O Come, O Come Emmanuel”, come to us God with us. At Christmas we celebrate God coming to live among His people. Over time we seem to have forgotten that God came as a baby, who later died on a cross, so that we might receive the indwelling Holy Spirit – God, not only among us, but in us. Even with that knowledge, in today’s world, it is easy to be overwhelmed with all that is going on and question, “Where is God in all this?”

That question could well have been on Joseph’s mind when the angel appeared to him telling him to take his family and flee to Egypt. This would entail about a week’s journey on foot. As any parent knows, any journey, no matter how long, will be complicated by traveling with a toddler. Now envision a journey of 100+ miles, on foot, under cover of darkness, carrying all that you own,... plus a toddler. Joseph showed great faith to respond with trust that God would be with him and his family as they fled Herod’s wrath.

God *was* with the Holy Family in their flight. Although under Roman rule at the time, Egypt was out of Herod's jurisdiction and so the family would find safety there. The area of Egypt where they likely settled had a large Jewish population, even its own synagogue. So, although they would be "foreigners" in Egypt, they would be among like-minded neighbors, and with the gifts of the Magi they would be able to sustain themselves until Joseph could establish himself in business.

While we might breathe a sigh of relief that Jesus was spared from Herod's massacre of the innocents, we still ask, "Where is God in all this?" That is a hard question. To think that God would allow even one child to perish, let alone 20-30 that resided in Bethlehem and its environs is difficult to wrap our heads around. We are again reminded that evil exists in this world. God was with His people then and is with us still. His will was not defeated by Herod's paranoia. Jesus was spared to live out the life he was destined to live for our salvation.

As an aside, it recently occurred to me that there was one other baby boy who survived the massacre – Jesus' cousin, John, who would become known as John the Baptist. The Bible tells us that John "⁸⁰ ... grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel." (Luke 1) Tradition says that John was hidden by his parents, this would explain his living in the wilderness until he began his public ministry. Unfortunately, according to the same tradition, this resulted in the death of his father, Zechariah. He lost his life because he

refused to divulge the child's hiding place. Again, God's will would not be undone by the evil intents of human beings. Both the one who prepared the way and the one who was the Way, were spared because God was with them.

Once the child Jesus' life was no longer in danger, God recalled the family from Egypt. Instructions to Joseph to remove the family to the little, backwater town of Nazareth, ensured Jesus could grow with no further threats from the powers of the day.

Jesus appeared during a time in history that could be referred to as uncertain times – paranoid tetrarchs, emperors set on world domination, all made life difficult at best, treacherous at worst. Despite the political climate of the day, God was among His people. We, too, live in uncertain times. Governments and institutions that have functioned for hundreds of years are in flux, not just in the US, but around the world. Advancing technologies bring both blessings and curses. It is increasingly difficult to distinguish between what is artificial and what is real. We question again, “Where is God in all this?”

Recently, we heard news of the Bondi Beach mass shooting in Australia, as Jewish faithful celebrated the start of Hanukkah. We asked again, “Where is God in all this?” As we watched the video of the civilian taking down one of the shooters at Bondi Beach, we were reminded that God is among us. Lives were saved by the actions of this one man.

Although the shooter's evil intent was not stopped entirely, its damage was limited.

God is right where He has always been, in the hearts and minds of His people. God is among us. When His word is lived out in the flesh – the orphan and widow are cared for, the alien is welcomed, those who live on the margins of society are treated with justice and mercy, then we will *see* God among us. We may not hear announcing angels bringing a word from God, but we have God's Word available to us anytime. If you need to have an encounter with an angel to prove God is still among us, listen to this advice from the Apostle Paul:

Hebrews 13:2

Do not forget to show **hospitality** to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown **hospitality** to **angels** without knowing it.

On this first Sunday after Christmas, we rejoice that Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, has come. We rejoice that God is among us even now, in the indwelling Holy Spirit. Let us never cease to be amazed...God is among us!

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