

Matthew 1.18-25 & O Antiphons for 21-23 December
Midweek Advent Service
13 December 2017
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

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Immanuel. "God with us." The constant prayer of the church of all times. The prayer of Adam. The prayer of Abraham. The prayer of David. Of Solomon and Isaiah. Of Malachi. The prayer of Simeon and Anna in the temple. Even our prayer. For so we sing every Advent, "O come, O come, Immanuel." That is, "Come, God, and be with us." The longing of the nations woven into a haunting melody. The hope of all humankind painted in stark relief on the canvas of a world cast into darkness and the shadow of death.

That's right where the reading from Scripture takes us today. Right into the middle of the tragedy of human existence. You've read and heard it so many times by now you hardly notice it. But once you see it it fairly screams off the pages of Scripture.

For here a pious Jewish man sinfully refuses to shoulder responsibility for what he can regard as nothing but sin. And exercises the out-option that, Jesus says, "God gave him because of his hardness of heart." Divorce. For Mary's purported obvious infidelity, he'll put her away. "Done with it." Return the dowry. Joseph won't have his reputation drug through mud.

Nor will he throw his betrothed under the bus. He'll put her away quietly. That wouldn't look good on him. Neither will he make a big stink about. Because the stink is already too great to bear. The shame attaching to sin—the shame attaching especially to this sin—is too great. Joseph's former fiancée, as they'll call her, will carry it with her all her life as she goes about toddler in tow to the clucks of the villagers.

The burden of sin. Unbearable in this life. Fatal for the next.

In the middle of all this, what do *you* think Mary and Joseph were singing? No need for the haunting medieval melody. Their own life was the melody to which their prayer was sung.

Come, teach us the way of prudence.

Come with an outstretched arm and redeem us.

Come quickly to deliver us.

Come and rescue us, the prisoners who are in darkness and the shadow of death.

Come and enlighten us who sit in darkness and the shadow of death.

Come and save us all, whom You made out of clay.

Come and save us, O Lord our God.

Their prayer and their song.

You can see this in your own lives, too, can't you? Like Joseph and Mary, many of you live in really tangible ways with the effects of your own sin, and cover for the sin of others.

Broken homes. Failed marriages. Divorce.

Lives saddened by rebellious children.

The learned and callous indifference to the suffering of others. Or your own suffering of the indifference of others to you.

The stigma of a reputation trampled in the mud, deservedly or undeservedly, we might say, but never justly. The guilt of having destroyed someone with your own tongue.

The constant striving after something bigger. Something better. Something different. And the emptiness that can come from an unsettled heart.

The tragedy that ripples down from father to son, and from son to grandson, of despising preaching and the Word.

The scoffer's curse that settles on those who by the Lord's name call down curses on others.

The horror in the face of your own death when you're forced to realize that the self-creating, self-inventing, self-sustaining powers you thought you had were nothing but a figment of a desperately godless imagination.

That's the melody of life. Haunting. Longing. Desperate for relief. And there is none.

There wasn't for Joseph and Mary, either. Just a legalistic out. Write up the divorce papers. Have the process serve them. Break off all contact. Be done with it. Start anew. If you can.

But the Lord God knows they couldn't start anew any more than you can. The Lord and Ruler of the house of Israel, who had given the Law on Sinai knew what the glory of the holiness of this thing does to human flesh. The one who fashioned them out of clay knew that broken sinners can't put themselves back together any more than a broken pot can.

But far from saying, "Done with it," He answered the age-old prayer of His broken creation. The eternal Wisdom of God. The Adonai and Ruler of Israel. The Root of Jesse. The Key of David and Scepter of the house of Israel. The Dayspring from on high. The King of the nations—that one became *Immanuel*. God with us. God *for* us. Not aloof, but intimately involved. Not sitting up in heaven with a wry smile on His face, but nailed to a cross, face twisted in pain and grief. So wise in wisdom that the wisdom of the cross must appear to be foolishness. So powerful in power that His power that even in incarnate weakness He has the power to save.

It's a wonderful twist, isn't it, that in the midst of this confusion—an unmarried pregnant girl, an upright Jewish would-be father of a Child not his own talking quietly to the rabbi about drafting the writ of divorce—in the midst of all this Lord Himself shoulders the blame; and in shouldering the blame, makes the solution.

Because God-with-us means nothing if it doesn't mean that God's on our side. God with us means nothing if it doesn't mean "Jesus," Yeshua, the Greater Joshua, the final "YHWH saves!" From sin!

God with us means nothing if it doesn't mean that *He* should repair the broken pots. That *He* who had given the Law should fulfill it in our place, for us. That *He* who attached both blessing and curse to His holy Law should under His own Law become a curse, that we through Him might become blessed.

And that's exactly what God did. Immanuel, God-with-us, means that God wove Himself into the haunting, longing melody of His people. That those in whose flesh He entered this sin-filled world He also redeemed. That to the mother who gave Him life, He gave eternal life. And that upon the earthly father who would not have Him as his Son He bestowed the name "child of God." (Jn 1.13)

Just as He has done for each and every one of you.

Because today I am your messenger from God, no less than the angel who spoke to Joseph. And I say to you: "Do not fear. For that which was conceived in Mary is from the Holy Spirit. The splendor of light everlasting. The King of the nations. Immanuel. And in faith you shall call His name is Jesus, for He has saved you, His people, from your sins."

Amen.

In nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti. Amen.

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