

Emmanuel

Matthew 1:18-25

Tonight is usually Mary's night, but I want to focus on the one standing by her side at the manger, Joseph. But for Joseph Jesus would not have been born, and we would not be here.

He must have been beside himself when Mary, his betrothed, told him she was with child. No gospel records the moment. He knew he was not the father. He could have had her charged and stoned to death for adultery. He could have exposed her to public shame. But he was a "just man" the text says. In the Hebrew tradition a "just man" is called a "*Fzaddik*", a righteous man, who was person where both justice and mercy resided. Righteousness included kindness and mercy. So, he began plans to divorce her quietly, and go on with his suddenly altered life.

But as he considered this path, an angel of the Lord appeared to to him in a dream. (Angels of the Lord were in plentiful supply that season.)

The angel said:

Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, Joseph, for the child that is conceived is of the Holy Spirit. Name him "Jesus" for God has come to save.

“All this”, Matthew adds, took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken through the prophet:

Behold a virgin shall conceive
and his name shall be Emmanuel,
(God with us).

When Joseph awoke from sleep he believed the dream and obeyed it. He took Mary as his wife, saving her life and the life of the child in her womb. We lift him up tonight as the savior of the Savior. We raise him up as the one who believed in the dream of Emmanuel, God-with-us.

Can we believe this night in a place more deeply in our hearts and minds that God is with us, Emmanuel? God has come alongside us in Jesus and this God will never leave our sides.

Christmas is profoundly about connection, connection with God and with one another, especially those we love. To feel disconnected at Christmas and all alone is an especially painful thing.

Such is why there are so many secular Christmas songs about longing to be with the ones you love and the sadness of being alone, without love. Elvis Presley’s “Blue Christmas”, Bing Crosby’s “I’ll Be Home for Christmas”, “I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas”, which is more than about snow. Joni Mitchell’s

“River”. Here’s one I hadn’t heard: “Christmas Eve can Kill You.” Almost every famous singer’s Christmas album will have a sad song or two. Why? To make us lonely folk know we are not alone; there are many like us.

But the Christmas message is God is with us and will not forsake us. As we look up at the night sky and see the immensity of the cosmos, we may feel insignificant and alone in the universe. But tonight we hear the glad tidings: God is with us. We are not alone. Christ was born for us.

Abraham Lincoln often visited hospitals to visit wounded and dying soldiers—of both sides. The story is told of one visit where a young soldier, dying of his wounds, asked Lincoln to stay with him until he died, and Lincoln stayed the night with him until he breathed his last breath. God is with us in every dark night.

It seems to be God’s message throughout the Bible. I will go with you wherever you go. And Jesus’ last words to his disciples before ascending into heaven were: And lo, I will be with you always.”

Can you believe the dream of Emmanuel tonight? Joseph did. In Stephen Sondheim’s “*Into the Woods*”, there is a song that becomes an anthem, “No One is Alone.”

No one is alone. No one is alone. No. One. Is. Alone. God has come
alongside.

It may feel as insubstantial as a dream, here now and then gone. But it has
become as substantial as a real child in a real manger whose birth we hold close
to us this night as God holds us close.

No one is alone.

O holy child of Bethlehem

descend to us we pray...

We hear the Christmas angels

The great glad tidings tell,

O come to us, abide with us

Our Lord Emmanuel.