

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the first day of December. Now that Thanksgiving has been put to bed, it's time. It's time to prepare our hearts and our lives for the coming Christ. It's time for us to prepare our homes and our church with festive decorations. It's time to prepare our calendars for extra events. It's time to prepare our Christmas list. With all of this preparation, we hope to have the perfect Christmas. The perfect tree, the perfect party, the perfect Christmas morning. We strive for everything to go as planned, perfectly to the image we have of a perfect Christmas. Hallmark, movies, and the shopping catalog all add to our image of the perfect Christmas. Everything in our culture drives our desire to live up to the dream of a perfect Christmas.

We see the images of the sweet nativity scene of the first Christmas and think that is a perfect Christmas. The three of them – Mary, Joseph, and Jesus – the perfect family beginning their journey together. The Shepherds stand by in awe of this great gift that has come. The animals witness all of it and are part of this perfect scene. We forget that the first Christmas was far from perfect.

In fact, it was scandalous. Mary and Joseph were engaged, but then Mary becomes pregnant by someone else. Joseph is heartbroken. His dream of marrying her is shattered. “To Joseph, this pregnancy is a violation of social convention and ethics for an unmarried woman.”¹ Mary has violated the moral rule for women in their culture. Joseph realized that things were not going to

go as planned, that their union would not be perfect after all. Joseph decides to dismiss her quietly.

The customary legal punishment for adultery in the Bible is death. Remember, Jesus saved the woman who was caught in adultery from stoning. Adultery was a capital crime. If the woman somehow escaped death, she was publicly disgraced, which is another form of death. She needed a man to survive, so if no man wanted her, her life would be grim.

Joseph did not want that for Mary. Despite his personal hurt and disappointment, he was a godly man and would do the right thing. An important character trait that God saw in Joseph. God entrusted Joseph to raise the Son of God, so there had to be goodness in Joseph. Before Joseph carries out his plan, God intervenes through an angel, who explains that Mary is still pure. She is not an adulterer; She is pregnant by the Holy Spirit.

Which is another whole ball of wax. Who is going to believe this? This is unheard of. This hasn't happened before. How would he explain this to people? No one really understood how the Holy Spirit worked at this time. So, Matthew in his telling of the nativity story, focuses on the facts that Jesus is the Messiah who they've been wanting for, and the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophesy.

Matthew refers to “the prophet Isaiah who speaks to a situation of impending destruction of Judah in a time when the Northern Kingdom has been annexed by Assyria.”² Isaiah offers of a vision of hope,

¹ Aaron Klink, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, location 3201.

² Lib Campbell, *Spiritual Disciplines*, p. 416.

that “God’s steadfast love and redeeming work will soon be born as a child among them.”³ This child’s name, according to the angel in Joseph’s dream, will be Jesus, which means “God saves.” Yet, Isaiah says, “they will name him Emmanuel,” (v.23) which means “God with us.” Even though Israel is not in a perfect situation, one that could be their destruction, Isaiah promises that God is with them and will save them from their plight, and they will have evidence of this through a child who is coming soon.

The name Emmanuel is more of a “divine promise” than a personal name. Isaiah meant that God will be with them in the midst of their nation’s crisis.⁴ To Matthew, “Immanuel” means “Jesus is God with us”⁵ sent to save us from our own crises. Having the perfect Christmas with the perfect gift wrap and the perfect ornaments will not save us from our imperfect lives. Only God-With-Us, Jesus, can save us from our imperfection. Jesus was sent to save Israel from their plight, and he continues to save us from ours. God came to be with us in the human form to join us in our humanity, to walk with us through our far-from-perfect lives, to save us from ourselves.

During this season of Advent, we will look at each of the gospels telling the same nativity story. Each gospel writer tells the story a little differently, but they all conclude that God is with us. We will look at the different ways God is with us each week. I invite you during this season of

Advent, to look for Emmanuel. Look for God in your daily lives. Look for God among us and in our less-than-perfect situations.

Let us now look for “God with us” in the bread and the cup as we celebrate holy communion.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Douglas r.a. Hare, *Feasting on the Word*, location 3282.

⁵ Ibid.