

## *Christmas: God With Us*

I began last lesson with Jesus' words, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me!" I sought to highlight that astounding statement from the lips of Jesus as the proper context for understanding the implications of the Christmas story. I said that when Matthew introduces us to Jesus as the Christ in his opening line that ears attuned to those words would make the connection. Matthew is about to tell us the story of Israel's long awaited Messiah, the one who, as Psalm 2 indicates, is God's anointed King and ruler of the world.

We walked with Matthew as he introduced us to the strange and wondrous story of Mary and the child in her womb via the Holy Spirit of God. We imagined ourselves in her shoes and in the shoes of her fiancé Joseph. We heard along with Joseph the verdict of the angel. The child is from God, you will call him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. We heard Matthew's running commentary, "This took place to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy that the virgin will be with child and will be called Immanuel – God with us." And where we left off then is with this thought: How are we supposed to understand that 'God with us' business? And I said that the way to come to terms with this is to go where Matthew takes us. What he lays out for us is not a profound theological treatment of the Trinity but a glimpse into the glorious life of this one called Jesus. And it starts with the child Jesus.

Matthew 1:24–25 (NIV84)

<sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. <sup>25</sup> But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

As we turn the page into Matthew chapter 2 I want you to feel the tension as we enter into Matthew's first account about what it looks like when God is with us in the person of Jesus. I want you to have a firm grip in your minds of all the glorious Messianic expectations which Israel was rightly hanging on to as Matthew begins to tell us how we go from the child conceived in the midst of potential scandal to the man who claims to have all the authority. What will this journey look like; this God With Us journey?

Matthew 2:1–2 (NIV84)

**2** After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem <sup>2</sup> and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

*"We three kings of Orient are..."* This is where that Christmas carol fits into the story. Magi, wise men from the east; they're not called kings in the text, neither is there said to be three of them but they come to Jerusalem guided by a star with a question on their lips. Where is the one who has been born

King of the Jews? Notice they're looking for a King. Up until this point Matthew has not specifically called Jesus a King; he has referred to him as the Christ four times but not King. In Matthew you will find that when foreigners, like these Magi, speak of Jesus, they typically use the word King, but when Jewish people do the same they typically use the word Christ. For example, when Jesus is on trial before the Jewish high priest in chapter 26 he asks him, "Are you the Christ?" When Jesus affirms that he is and the Jewish authorities proceed to mock and beat him their taunt is, "Prophecy to us Christ. Who hit you?" But when Jesus is later on trial before the Roman governor Pilate, his question is, "Are you the King of the Jews." And when his soldiers mock Jesus they mock him with, "Hail King of the Jews." These are two ways of saying the same thing. To claim to be Christ, the Anointed One, in a Jewish world translates into a non-Jewish world as a claim to be King. We would do well to remember this. When we see the word Christ we need to be reminded that the word King is very closely associated with it.

So, the Christ child is born and Magi from the east – foreigners – come looking for a King. And notice what Matthew does here. He sets these Magi and the birth of Jesus in the context of the reign of King Herod. This is Herod the Great by the way, one of the most brutal tyrants that ever held power in Israel. He claimed to be for the Jewish people but was little more than a puppet of Rome. Herod was a power hungry man and would do whatever it took to retain power. And if holding onto power at all costs defines you, you can bet that brutality will be part of your resume. Josephus, the Jewish historian tells us that Herod's life was characterized by paranoia that someone might be after his throne. In such moments even members of his own family were not safe. Josephus tells us that he murdered several members of his own family, including his mother in law, his wife, and even some of his own children<sup>1</sup>. The same Herod, when he approached death sent out an edict that several leading citizens of the country be killed at the time so that when he died the country would be assured to be in mourning. This is the political climate into which Jesus was born. And we're asking the question, "What would it look like if God showed up in the middle of all that." In the face of all of Israel's glorious Messianic hope God sends a child, this child. No tanks, no warheads, no legions of warriors but a child born into a situation ripe for scandal. And this, claims Matthew, is "God with us." We should be hearing the tension in all of this.

Under the nose of the great King Herod, Jesus who is called Christ is born and here come Magi from the east looking for a king. And what will they do when they find him? They will bow down before him in worship. This is a story about the authority of God and who will recognize it. The Magi understand that this child deserves their complete allegiance. In this story, with the appearance of the Magi from the east, we have an image of the nations of the world bowing before the King of the Jews. Israel's prophets spoke like this from time to time. The famous Isaiah 11 text speaks of a shoot springing up from the stump of Jesse (Jesse was King David's father) who brings with him justice, righteousness and faithfulness. In verse 10 we are told how the non-Jewish nations will respond to this King of the Jews.

---

<sup>1</sup> Who Was Jesus pg 87; HIBD pg 833

Isaiah 11:10 (NIV84)

<sup>10</sup> In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious.

The Magi in this text are complying with the prophecy; Herod, on the other hand, not so much.

Matthew 2:3–6 (NIV84)

<sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup> When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup> "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

<sup>6</sup> " 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for out of you will come a ruler  
who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.' "

This Bethlehem prophecy fits wonderfully into the whole of the story of Jesus thus far. Yes, it's about getting the place of his birth right, but it also restates for those who are hard of hearing that God is doing something glorious in an obscure way. Shouldn't the king to come be born in a place like Jerusalem instead? Backwoods Bethlehem? Indeed, Bethlehem! God, it seems delights to bring glory out of obscurity.

Matthew 2:7–8 (NIV84)

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

If he knew what was good for him, Herod would indeed bow before the Christ child. But that's not Herod's style. Let's not forget who we're dealing with; Herod is gathering intelligence so that he can eliminate a potential rival to his throne.

Matthew 2:9–12 (NIV84)

<sup>9</sup> After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. <sup>11</sup> On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of

incense and of myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

The foreigners get it right, they are witness to a glorious sign in the heavens and they bow before the King. Where are Israel's wise men? Are there no wise men in Israel who have come to present their gifts to the Christ alongside these Magi from the east? Israel's strange story chugs along with God himself making the points he wants to make. The point here is the same point made with the mention of at least two of the women in the genealogy of Christ, Rahab and Ruth. Rahab the Canaanite harlot had a profound faith which shines as a beacon in the midst of the story of Israel's conquest over Jericho. Ruth is from Moab, a nation Israel despises, and what does she do but upstage the faith of many an Israelite in her day and becomes the great grandmother of King David. These Magi fit in well here; pagans from the east who are the first to bow before Israel's King Jesus. Jesus, Immanuel, God with us; he will save his people from their sins. But not in the way any of his people seemed to expect.

Matthew 2:13–15 (NIV84)

<sup>13</sup> When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

<sup>14</sup> So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, <sup>15</sup> where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

If we have ears to hear we will recognize this story; a trip to Egypt and a call out of Egypt. Matthew is making an explicit reference to Israel's Exodus. Israel was born out of the womb of Egypt. Israel is called God's son in this text Matthew quotes. Jesus is God's unique son, and the point is that Israel's long awaited story is being retold around Jesus. There isn't a Jew on the face of the earth that wouldn't be saying, "Hey, this is our story!" Indeed it is and Jesus is bringing it to completion.

Matthew 2:16–18 (NIV84)

<sup>16</sup> When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. <sup>17</sup> Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

<sup>18</sup> "A voice is heard in Ramah,  
weeping and great mourning,  
Rachel weeping for her children  
and refusing to be comforted,  
because they are no more."

You want to know what authority in the wrong hands looks like. It looks like Herod on a rampage slaughtering little children. I told you there was a tyrant in the story. “What’s going on here? What happened to Immanuel, God with Us?” Indeed, is this what it looks like when God is with us? Is this what the arrival of Israel’s long awaited Messiah brings; innocent children slaughtered by a tyrant? I thought Jesus had all authority. Is that just talk? What does that have to say to the weeping mothers and fathers in Bethlehem? A moment ago Bethlehem was in the spotlight of the glory of God; home of the Messiah! I’m sure in this hour they would rather someone else be in the spotlight for God. What does this mean? What does it say? Why is this in the story of the birth of the Christ child? It doesn’t belong!

Or does it? God with us, in the person of the Christ child doesn’t mean that Jesus is going to skip through this life exempt from pain and suffering. Yes, but this is not his suffering it is theirs! I know and the image we’re supposed to be getting ahold of here is that God with Us knows all about the brokenness of the world. He has emptied himself of his glory and become one of us to the degree that he experiences the horror of our plight. “But he ended up safe in Egypt while those kids in Bethlehem died?” I know. What do you think Joseph and Mary thought about that? These are very difficult questions.

Here’s the irony. The Christ child has arrived and yet instead of freedom, oppression; instead of glory, a tyrant on a rampage. And yet Matthew insists – this is God with Us. And the story doesn’t end with the Christ child hiding out in Egypt!! Isn’t this a very strange way to tell the story of the arrival of God to save his people from their sins? And once again just like the mystery of how Jesus could really be God with Us, Matthew doesn’t bother to stop and offer a detailed explanation at this point. He goes on to tell his story for he believes that somehow in this one we call Jesus all our objections will be answered. Can we trust him for a moment?

What puts this all into perspective is what we find later on in the story of Jesus. He himself is not exempt from suffering. He will suffer! There is a huge surge of tension that we ought to feel as we read this text of Herod’s massacre of the boys of Bethlehem. Somehow this son of God that was placed in the womb of Mary is himself subject to all the brokenness of the ugly world we have created and he, although not here in this specific moment, will enter fully into our pain. Whatever else this means it doesn’t mean that God is some cosmic twister of the dials, too far removed from us to know what we suffer. No, Jesus from the time he was born knew what sorrow was; he was very familiar with suffering. Despite the tension, despite the questions, you can’t stop reading Matthew’s gospel here.

Matthew 2:19–23 (NIV84)

<sup>19</sup> After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt <sup>20</sup> and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.”

<sup>21</sup> So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. <sup>22</sup> But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been

warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee,<sup>23</sup> and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: "He will be called a Nazarene."

Into Egypt went the Christ child and Israel suffers. This is Israel's story and Jesus has entered fully into it. Back to the Promised Land and things are not so promising. Herod is dead but his son rules in his place and so this humble little family make their way north to Galilee, hopefully out of harms reach. Nazareth becomes home town.

And this is where Jesus grows up. Christ child or not he doesn't get a short cut through life. Like any other boy in Nazareth Jesus grows up fully aware of birth and death, the present state of the nation under the occupying forces of Rome, Israel's sacred scriptures, and the hope for the nation spelled out within them. He learns to pray their prayers and dream their dreams and thirty years go by. Thirty years pass between the end of chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3 without a single comment. It's not important, what follows is important!

And with Chapter 3 we move away from the Christmas story into the rest of Matthew's gospel. A wild wilderness prophet is the first one on the scene. John the Baptizer appears calling the nation Israel to repentance, plunging the penitent into the Jordan for the forgiveness of their sins. John's baptism is too, in some sense, a rehearsal of Israel's story. The nation was born through the water of the Red Sea and John is calling for rebirth. John was baptizing the people and pointing them towards glory – the arrival of the kingdom of heaven. God was about to show up and John's prophetic vocation was to announce his coming. Matthew describes him as the one Isaiah spoke of, "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" Matthew tells his story in such a way as to insist that John, in preparing the way for the Lord, was preparing it for Jesus – this one who is God With Us, Immanuel.

A voice from heaven confirms the truth. "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased," an echo of Psalm 2. With that Jesus begins his public ministry. His first step mirrors Israel's first step out of Egypt – into the wilderness. No Israelite would miss the connection. This is their story in miniature. They as a nation were baptized in the Red Sea and from there were led into the wilderness. Their testing would highlight their failure; Jesus' testing would highlight his success. Jesus will succeed where Israel failed; that is the primary take home point from Jesus' time in the wilderness.

And as we read on we continue to ask what does it mean that Jesus is Immanuel, God With Us? What does it look like when God shows up to redeem his people and rescue the world? Matthew insists that it looks like this young man from Nazareth proclaiming hope wherever he goes; this young man touching the sick and the dying and giving them health and life; this young man calling disciples to follow him, revealing the true ways of God; this young man calming storms, casting out demons and raising the dead; this young man full of generosity, full of kindness, full of compassion. Those who had wandered away he called home, but those who oppressed the people of God and refused to repent he rebuked severely. He had no patience for those who grossly misrepresented the heart of his Father. His

intolerance for the way of evil earned him a target on his back and this is what ultimately led to the showdown in Jerusalem.

His disciples adored him. His enemies hated him! And all the while there was something about him that escaped even those closest to him. He spoke of the cross and it made no sense to anyone. And one day when they were sure the moment of glory was upon them he surrendered to his foes in the garden. They led him away, tried him and had him crucified. His friends were stunned; shocked into silence. His enemies sang in the streets and spat in his dead face. The sky went black that dark Friday and the earth shook, but not for the last time. The grave could not hold him and once more, as the earth trembled, the Father set him free.

The cross completes the story that began in the strange Christmas scene at the beginning. No one expected that God with Us would look like this. No one imagined that God loved like this. No one conceived that God would so enter into our pain to set us free! And this is the Jesus, resurrected from the dead who declares to his disciples,

Matthew 28:18–20 (NIV84)

<sup>18</sup> ... “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always (O Emmanuel), to the very end of the age.”

God is with us in the person of Jesus today, here and now. We have this from Jesus’ own lips. And although we too know what suffering is all about we are not in despair for we realize that one day Jesus will complete what he has begun. One day the rocks and trees, the mountains and hills will sing with jubilation for our Jesus will return and make all things right.

He’s calling you today through his cross to give your all to him; to trust him with your life, fully trust him.

If you have yet to respond to Jesus’ call to embrace him in baptism what are you waiting for? Get in the water, give him your life and learn what it means to be surrendered to Immanuel, God With Us, Christ, the King.