

I'm pretty sure that, if the writer of the Gospel of Matthew had to summarize the entire message of his work with just one word, it would be the word that he introduces in his opening chapter.

It is a word that he pulls from the Old Testament Prophet Isaiah and, knowing that his audience does not speak Hebrew, takes the trouble to translate for them. That word, of course, is Emmanuel and, as Matthew so helpfully tells us, it means "God is with us."

Sometimes, though, I think we may think that this word is just about what is happening in this particular passage. That is, it is only about the strange, miraculous conception of Jesus.

After all, Matthew tells us that Mary became pregnant through the action of the Holy Spirit in order to fulfill an Old Testament prophecy about a virgin conceiving. And the child in that prophecy is given the name Emmanuel.

But that Emmanuel idea is not just about how Jesus was conceived. It is, for Matthew, the essential meaning behind Jesus' entire life and behind Matthew's story of that life.

That is why Matthew doesn't just open his Gospel by saying that the birth of this baby means that God is with us. He also ends his Gospel by giving, as Jesus' final words, **"And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."** The entire book is about how God is and always will be with us in Christ Jesus.

For the story of Jesus' Nativity is not about the mechanics of one particular child's conception. Matthew isn't trying to explain how it happened or how the DNA of this man, Jesus, could possibly be both human and divine at the same time. If you try to understand that, you will never make logic or sense of it. (And believe me, Christians have been trying to make sense of it for two thousand years.)

Instead, he is inviting us to experience that presence of God with us in Jesus. As the Gospel progresses, we will meet people who are sick, disabled, struggling with poverty or social exclusion among a host of other issues. And at every point, we are meant to ask, what if God were present for that person in that moment? And, in the wonders, the healings, the affirmations that Jesus offers to those people, we are to see an answer to that question.

So, one thing that Matthew is telling you in this opening passage is that no matter



what you may be struggling with this Christmastime, God wants to meet you where you are in Christ Jesus.

Jesus came into the world – became human just like us – so that God can understand what it is like to carry the pain that you carry in your body or in your soul. God became human so that God may know what that anxiety or fear that cripples you is really like. Jesus came so that God might know your frustration when you can't make ends meet or when you feel completely frazzled by all you have to do.

So, Emmanuel, first and foremost, is meant to bring you comfort and joy as it lets you know that, no matter what you are facing, you are not alone.

Emmanuel is also a challenge to all of us – a challenge to see and know that presence. We all know how hard that can be when you are caught up in your worries, fears and troubles. That is why Matthew constantly reminds us that we need to have faith. It means that, as we learn to trust that presence of God with us in our troubles, we will be able to experience it more and more along with the healing, hope and renewal that comes with that trust.

But this Gospel also brings out a surprising meaning of Emmanuel as you read it through. Matthew is the only writer who includes one particular parable of Jesus; it is the parable that Jesus ends by saying, **“for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.”** (Matthew 24:42-43)

I mean, this comes out of nowhere. All of a sudden, we discover that one of the ways that God continues to be with us to this very day is in the faces and the outstretched hands of the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers, the poorly clothed, the sick and of the people we write off as criminals!

These are the people we do our best to ignore as we pass them by in the street. These are the people that we post nasty things about on the internet and that we are afraid of. Yet Jesus is telling us that he is constantly trying to reveal the presence of God to us through them.

And I know this is a shocking thing to hear from a Christian preacher, but I think Jesus is right about that. I have experienced it myself, and I know that some of you have as well. When you get involved in offering food or clothing or your loving presence to people who are struggling, you will have undeniable experiences of the presence of God. There will be moments when you see Jesus in that person across from you.

So, that is what Matthew tells us that Christmas is about. It is not just about some miraculous birth that took place two thousand years ago. It is about how we continue to experience Emmanuel in our daily lives, and how that changes everything.

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