

MATTHEW 1:23

GOD WITH US

“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel”

(which means, God with us).”

Christmas Eve, and the world is at peace. Or is peace only a vague and puerile wish? Conflicts continue unabated throughout the world. Governments are in continuing turmoil as they attempt to “fix” problems they themselves have created. Worse yet, human beings, even small ones, sometimes die in horrible and unfair ways. One year ago, Christmas arrived under a shadow of dark sorrow in a small Connecticut town. A mentally deranged young man—not much more than a boy—slaughtered twenty children and six adults in a gun free zone. More recently, in Centennial, Colorado, another young socialist intent on killing as many people as possible, was stopped by a good man armed with a gun. Though a greater tragedy was averted, nevertheless, a young woman named Claire Davis ultimately succumbed to her wounds and died.

When parents die, they take a large portion of the past with them; when children die, they take away the future as well. The death of a child must surely qualify as one of the most terrible insults that any parent would ever suffer. We could endure walking through the dark valley alone more easily than to join as the latest recruit in the world’s army of bereaved.

What does all this dark talk have to do with Christmas? Good question! Some individuals have described the Christmas Season as one of the most stressful periods of the year. It is not because we remember that God became man that the season is stressful; it is because we fail to remember that God became man that we experience stress. Our tendency is to place unrealistic expectations on ourselves and on those who share the season with us. We emphasise family and set the season up as a time of personal fulfilment, neither of which situations is wrong nor even particularly unworthy of our aspirations. However, we do live in a fallen world; and even as we vainly attempt to shove the rude intrusions of the world from conscious thought (if only for a short while), new fears assail the peace and new tragedies arise to disturb what serenity we had hoped to find.

Things haven’t changed much in the past two millennia. A child was born of a virgin. This was no ordinary child; He was announced as the King of the Jews, God’s Anointed One. However, there was no palace for this child—a manger in a roughhewn cave where animals were usually sheltered would be his first crib. No showers would honour His birth, though shepherds would come to worship, bringing with them an account of angels announcing his birth. Later, Persian scholars would arrive, bearing rich gifts to present to the infant.

The arrival of these scholars would upset the kingdom into which the child was born. One account of His birth tells us that the king, like modern despots who have travelled in his same path, “was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him” [MATTHEW 2:3]. That is an understatement! Herod, the king in the account, was determined to cling to power regardless of the cost; even if it meant murdering his own children, he was determined to permit no threat to his power. Like modern Korean despots, he would murder anyone who disturbed his peace. Thus, it is accurate to state that when the king was troubled, all Jerusalem would be troubled with him.

The king, murderous soul that he was, endeavoured to find the child. He didn't want to worship the infant—he wanted to ensure the child's death. When his devious efforts were thwarted, he ordered the murder of all children born in the vicinity of the small village in which the child was born. It has always astonished me how the birth of God's own Son was the cause of such heartache for others. Place the two verses in juxtaposition:

“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel

(which means, God with us).”

[MATTHEW 1:23]

“Herod ... became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in that entire region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men” [MATTHEW 2:16].

Imagine! God with us! And His presence became the reason for deep sorrow. Understand that unlike legends circulated among some religious practitioners; likely no more than a dozen children were killed. Bethlehem was a small town, and Herod only ordered the death of infant boys two years and under. It was a needless and futile effort by the maddened king because God was protecting His Son. Still, in several homes in the little town of Bethlehem, mothers and fathers wept bitter tears at the brutality displayed toward innocent children. Grandparents would have reacted with stunned silence. Neighbours would have perhaps tried unsuccessfully to comfort parents who could not be consoled.

Even the Child that was the cause of such sorrow cast a dark shadow over His parents. For when Joseph and Mary took the infant into the Temple that He might be presented before the Lord, an old man known to everyone as one who was awaiting the Consolation of Israel approach them. Taking the child in His arms, the old man blessed God, saying:

“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation
that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel.”

[LUKE 2:29-32]

Then, turning to Joseph and Mary, the old man prophesied to Mary, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed” [LUKE 2:34, 35].

Thus, the weird mix of joy and sorrow marks the season, just as the first advent was marked by sorrow and joy. In Heaven—inexpressible joy voiced by angel choirs; on earth, mothers weeping disconsolately because their children had been slaughtered. Scholars rejoiced with great joy; and an enraged king, compelled his minions to act against all propriety and decency to slaughter innocent infants. The strangeness and scandal of the first Christmas is easily lost in the familiar rituals.

God's Son did not come to give a philosophical explanation of the human condition; rather, God sent His Son to share our condition. Jesus is "God with us." God did not hold Himself aloof from mankind as some faceless deity who treats us with studied disdain; God joined the human drama, God became as we are that we might know He has a face. In Christ, God has shared and dignified ordinary human life. The delight, the boredom, the suffering, the fear—each condition alike is shared by the Child who born of a virgin.

Therefore, we read, "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery... He had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted" [HEBREWS 2:14, 15, 17, 18].

Because this is true, we are also confident that "Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" [HEBREWS 4:14-16].

Christmas is not defined, as so many attempt to do, as sentimental optimism about the human condition. Neither is Christmas a mere teaching about the will of God. Christmas is the assertion—the bold assertion—that God came to our rescue. At our moment of deepest sorrow, He shares our grief. He shares our joy. He infuses into our lives hope in the face of an otherwise hopeless situation.

All this is crazy talk, unless it is true. If true, the observation would be everything. The tragedy is that so few people know Immanuel, God with us. Though virtually all Canadians have a Christmas observance, and a significant majority believe the biblical account of Jesus' birth, most no longer regard the holiday as a religious celebration. A growing number see this as a cultural holiday. Millennials are unlikely to attend a religious service, though they will celebrate with family and friends. Most will trade gifts. As we become ever busier, as ever greater demands are placed on our lives, we become less content and more stressed. If ever there was a time for us to know that God is with us, it is now.

God with us is just a phrase, unless God is actually with us. And He has promised, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" [HEBREWS 13:5]. However, we must receive Him. We receive Him when we receive the purpose of His coming. "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" [1 TIMOTHY 1:15]. The freedom He offers is not found in rite or ritual; it is found in relationship with Him. Jesus, the Son of God, was born to give His life as a sacrifice because of our broken condition. The good news concerning that sacrifice is that He didn't remain dead. On the third day after He was buried, He rose from the tomb. He is alive.

Therefore, the message of life is announced in these words, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is my Master,' believing in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be set free. In it with the heart that one believes and is made right with the Father, and with the mouth one openly agrees with God and is set free." When Paul wrote those words, he concluded by citing the Prophet Joel, "Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord shall be set free." I pray that this includes you; and it does if you believe the message of life. Amen.

