

The Wonder of Christmas: A Promise Sunday, 12/17/17

1 Do you know what an oxymoron is? An oxymoron is a word that has two parts that seem to contradict each other. I'll bet you didn't know that the word "oxymoron" is itself an oxymoron, with the term coming from two Greek words meaning "sharp" and "Dull."¹ Other commonly used oxymorons include "awfully good," "virtual reality," "open secret," "jumbo shrimp," "adult children," "civil war," "freezer burn," and "definite maybe." Oxymorons are interesting words because we usually understand what they mean without having to think about them, but when we do think about them, they offer what seems to be a startling and often humorous contradiction.

The Bible is full of oxymorons: Christ humbled himself and was exalted; Through our weakness we are strong; We receive when we give; only in dying do we find life. The list is a long one. But there are two huge oxymorons in the Christmas story that I'll bet you've overlooked, and they're hidden in plain sight in both of our scripture readings this morning: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."² Do you see the two oxymorons in this simple promise? The first is easy to spot: "Pregnant Virgin," although with today's technology, I suppose that's no longer an oxymoron. The second oxymoron is hidden in the name, Immanuel (or Emanuel), meaning, "God with us." We hear the promise of the angel Gabriel to Mary and Joseph, and the words of the Prophet Isaiah, and they just seem to make sense. At least once every year we simply accept that a virgin gave birth and that God came to be with us on earth. But there's wonder in the paradox of virgin birth! There's wonder in the idea of God with us! If we want to recover our wonder of Christmas, we'll need to spend some time dwelling on the wonder of God's promise that was fulfilled on Christmas morning

2 So two women are sharing coffee after the Christmas Eve service and one says to the other, "A virgin birth I can believe, but finding three wise men?" For some people, the promise of a virgin birth is simply something they're not ready to accept as possible. By definition, a miracle is something that can't happen in the natural, created order without the supernatural intervention of God. God's promise that a virgin will give birth is a promise of

¹ <https://www.thoughtco.com/awfully-good-examples-of-oxymorons-1691814>

² Isaiah 7:14(b), NIV

a miracle. Are you ready to believe in miracles this Christmas? Will you believe that God can and will do something out of the ordinary, something supernatural, something that can't be explained by Wikipedia or particle physics?

I'm a scientist by training and temperament, so the scientific method of hypothesis, observation, and analysis comes almost automatically to me. I have to say though that there are some things in this life that just don't yield themselves to the scientific method. There are some things in life that can only be grasped with the heart, things that require a surrender of ourselves to the holy imagination of God. Love is one of those things that's designed to overwhelm us with a sense of wonder, even more so with God's love for us and our love for God. The virgin birth is not only a miracle, it's a profound demonstration of God's love, for you and for me. What you believe about the virgin birth says something about what you believe about the limits of God's love. Is it possible that the God we pray to is powerful enough and loving enough to break into the created order in a way that only God can explain? Yes! The answer is yes! The wonder of the Christmas promise is that God's love for us is so relentless that when we failed to turn to God, God suspended all the rules of biology and physics in order to come to us.

3 The second oxymoron of the Christmas promise is that God is with us. Why is that an oxymoron? For more than a thousand years, the descendants of Abraham, and then the followers of Moses, understood that God was not with them, but above them. God appeared not to them, but to Moses, and then only on the top of a mountain. And what did Moses carry down from the mountain? It wasn't a copy of the New Testament, it was two stone tablets with the law of God, the Ten Commandments. God gave them the law through Moses, and let them know exactly what would happen if they crossed the line and broke the law. If they were obedient, they would be blessed. If they were disobedient, they would be punished, sometimes in very dramatic ways- fire, plague, drowning, earthquakes, lions, and bears. God was their King, and the King didn't walk with the commoners. So the God who was *above* them was sometimes a God that was *for* them, but when it came time to punish their disobedience, they experienced God as being *against* them.

A man once walked into the church I served carrying a book he had written. He wanted to sell me the book for the church library. It was illustrated by hand with what the

young man described as God's revelation to him of Jesus. As I paged through the book, it became clear that his image of Jesus was a giant man robed in white, hurling lightning bolts. After speaking with him, I learned he was struggling with untreated schizophrenia. I didn't buy the book, but I did pray with him and offered him help. I wonder how many of us carry the same fearful image of Jesus around. Perhaps we learned it in Sunday School. Perhaps we learned it from a disciplinarian parent. Perhaps we even learned it through some well-meaning but misguided preaching that was too rooted in the Old Testament and too ignorant of the Gospels.

The miracle of the Christmas promise is that while God was *above* us, Jesus bridged that great divide. God is now *with* us, Emanuel. And Jesus makes it abundantly clear that God is not *against* us. It wasn't a lightning bolt that Jesus wielded, but a healing hand and a wooden cross. And when Jesus left us to return to his Father, he fulfilled another great promise by sending the Holy Spirit to be our comforter, our guide, our conscience, and our intercessor. The wonder of Christmas is that God kept the greatest promise of them all, and God is *with* us, for now and forever!

4 As we prepare for Christmas Day, are you expecting the presence of God, or do you believe and act as if God is *above* you, or even *against* you? Consider this story of faith from Jennifer Rothschild:

Rose was a widow who lived in West Palm Beach, and when I was in college, many of us students visited her. My friend Mike told me how one evening he popped in on Rose at dinner time and she invited him in. They visited a few moments in her kitchen until he noticed her kitchen table was set for two. "Oh Rose," he said, "I didn't realize you were having a guest for dinner. I will scoot out."

She put her hand on his arm, stopping him and told him she always set two places at her table ever since her husband died over 30 years earlier. Mike assumed the second place setting was to remind her of her late husband and he commented about how sweet it was that she remembered him in that way. Rose quickly corrected my friend saying, "Oh, no. I set a place at my table every evening for Jesus. I sit with Him, listen to Him and expect Him to be with me. This is my way of showing Him."

Don't you love that?!

*Rose saved a seat at her table for Christ. We save seats at theaters and restaurants, right? Why do we do that? Because we anticipate someone showing up and filling that chair. We expect that certain someone to arrive and hang out with us! Have you ever saved a seat for Jesus?*³

How about you? When you get up in the morning, do you expect God to show up, to be a part of your day? Do you expect that God will be there when you don't feel like getting out of bed? When the grief you're carrying around in your heart feels bigger than you are? When the loneliness or fear you're facing are too much for you to handle on your own? The Christmas promise is that God is *with* us, Emanuel. What can you do to remind yourself of that promise, and to live with the expectation that God will show up, wherever you find yourself? Set a place for Jesus every day, because God is with us!

5 The Christmas season is a time to remember the wonder of God's relentless and miraculous love, but remembering is not enough. The Christmas season is a time to embrace the real and powerful presence of God in our lives, but embracing God is not enough. God's Christmas promise was part of a larger plan, a plan that was revealed thousands of years ago to a man named Abram. The loving God who's come to live with us intends that we show the same relentless love to others. If we acknowledge that God is with us in our anger and despair, then we are called to fulfill that promise in the lives of angry and despairing people. When we recognize God's presence in our loneliness or grief, that's our invitation to carry God's love to lonely and grieving people.

God's promise to be with us has been fulfilled. As Christians, Jesus followers, we join our lives with the purposes of God. There's so much more for us than the disappointments and broken promises this world has to offer. Embrace the Good News that God is with us, and then be the Good News for someone you can laugh with, cry with, help out, or simply listen to. God is with us, Emanuel!

³ <http://www.jenniferrothschild.com/how-to-expect-gods-presence/>



Buffalo United Methodist Church

...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!



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