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Advent 4

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Mathew 1:18-25
How or Why?

If you could ask God one question about the birth of Christ what would it be? Would you want to know what the angel Gabriel looked like? Italian painters have tried their best attempts at the figure. Or maybe you would you want to know if the star really led the wise men to Jesus? Astronomers have studied star patterns to see if such an event took place. Would you want to know something about Mary or Joseph? Historians have tried tracing their lineage and learning about their lifestyles. Or would you want to know something about Jesus, something about the incarnation and how it all actually happened? Theologians have been working on that mystery throughout the generations.

Yes, to be honest, we do want to know the answers to those questions. We are intrigued by this story. But sometimes the way our inquisitive minds work means that we can find ourselves being caught up in the details and asking the wrong kinds of questions.

When Admiral George Dewey's squadron needed coal for his ship during the battle of Manila Bay, the admiral placed a large order of coal without consulting his superiors.

Dewey soon received this telegram:
From: Navy Department, Washington, D.C.
To Dewey, Manila:
Why did you buy so much coal?
Bradford.

To which Dewey replied:
From: Flagship Olympia, Manila.
To Bradford,
Chief Bureau Equipment,
Washington:
To burn.
Dewey.

One of the problems we can encounter at Christmas time is that we find ourselves asking the wrong questions. As Christians seeking understanding for our faith, we must strive to ask the right questions that help give this story its true meaning and context.

A Sunday school teacher was asking her students questions to see how much they remembered of the Christmas story. She asked them does anyone know the name of Mary's husband. A small girls arm shot up in the air and when called upon she answered, "Mary's husband was named Verge." No, said the teacher

and where did you get that idea? “Well,” said the girl, “you know they are always talking about Verge and Mary!”

For the gospel writer Matthew, in the eight short verses he used to tell the story of the miraculous birth he did not spend his time writing a narrative account that would answer all of our questions about how this could possibly have happened.

Instead of focusing on the details of how, Matthew focused on the why. When Joseph decided to dismiss Mary quietly the angel appeared to him and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." The question was not how did this happen but why did this happen...Matthew did not mince words, this child, that was to be named Jesus would save the people from their sins.

Jesus was a derived Greek name from the Hebrew name Joshua, meaning savior. As one commentator put it, “this is more than a name, it is a job description.” But Matthew goes further than simply relying on the name of this child; Matthew refers to the prophet who said it would happen this way. "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." Emanu in Hebrew means with us and El is one of the Hebrew names for God. Emmanuel...God is with us. He shall be called Emmanuel. Matthew's emphasis on the name of the child is his way of answering the question why: Jesus - Savior. Emmanuel - God is with us. Jesus came to save us; Jesus came to bring God to us.

There is a story about a farmer who did not have much interest in church or the Christmas story. One Christmas Eve his wife and children went off to the parish nativity service while he remained home to finish the evening chores. The weather was bad with the snow falling and the wind blowing, as he rounded the barn he came across a flock of geese. They had been blown off their course and were stranded on his farm unable to fly in the storm. The farmer had compassion on them and realized his barn could give them shelter for the night. He opened the barn doors and stood back, hoping they would make their way in, but they didn't. The farmer tried to gently herd them towards the barn but they scattered in every direction. So he ran to the house and got some bread making a trail of crumbs towards the inside of the barn. But they were too frightened to approach.

The farmer was frustrated that the geese did not follow him and they did not realize he was trying to save them from the storm. Then he said to himself, “If only I could become like one of them, then they would follow me, I could lead them to safety and I could save them.”

If only I could become one of them, then I could save them. Jesus – Savior. Emmanuel – God with us. Emmanuel frames the entire Gospel of Matthew, God is with us in the birth of a child and as Jesus grows and we begin to follow him,

God is with us, and as Jesus dies – he promises to be with us for the rest of human history.

Emmanuel is one of the most important theological ideas for Christians to believe from our births until our deaths. It is one of the most central parts of our faith and our deepest hope that, yes, God is with us, God does not leave us.

There is a prayer that is known as the Traditional Christian Fisherman's Prayer – that reads simply, "Protect Me, O God for my boat is so small and your sea is so big." Emmanuel, be with us O God for our boats are so small and this world is so big. Emmanuel is not just a Christmas word it is an everyday word.

The Christmas story is a promise to us that begins with the gift of new life and it is a promise that will not let us go, throughout the days and years of our own lives.

Last week in London, I had the pleasure of meeting a young baby named Hugo Philip Scott Simpson Hayes. Young Hugo was born in November and it was only in August when I conduct his father's funeral. Philip Simpson Hayes had had cancer for the last five years and he never lived to meet his son or to be with his wife and five year old son for Hugo's birth. The advent that family experienced in preparing for Philip's death and Hugo's birth was unlike any I have witnessed. The prayers offered for and by that family spanned the breadth of the human experience. "Protect Me O God for my boat is so small and your sea is so big."

At Christmas, we give thanks that Christ came into this world to be with us, to be Emmanuel. At Christmas, we are reminded that Jesus too would endure the breadth of human experience and the reason he would do that...the why not the how, was so that he could become like us, and we might follow him, and he might save us.

French philosopher and Jesuit priest Pierre Chardin said, "We're not human beings on a spiritual journey, we are spiritual beings on a human journey." Throughout our human journey, the important thing to remember is Emmanuel - God is with us. God comes to us in the form of a child and grows with us, leads us, and loves us. In our living and our dying, the Christmas message is one that stays near and dear to our hearts. God is with us; Jesus Christ was born to save.

Matthew answered the question to why this all might be true, and so then God's question to us, in light of this miracle, in light of God's love, in light of this season: is what are you going to do about it? What will you do with your Emmanuel faith? Our boats might be small but we sail in God's sea.

Emmanuel, God be with you.

Amen.