



LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection - Matthew 1:18-25 (New Revised Standard Vision)

(v. 18) Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. (v. 19) Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. (v. 20) But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream 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. (v. 21) She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” (v. 22) All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: (v. 23) “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” (v. 24) When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, (v. 25) but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Christmas day is what would be considered the apex or crowning moment of the Advent Season. Up until now, we have been anxiously anticipating the arrival of the Savior, the Messiah, and the anointed one who will save us. Hopefully, we have taken great care to pay attention to the signs of his coming and we have even done what we can to prepare the way for his arrival. And now

on Christmas day, Jesus has arrived! He is here among us, and this world will never be the same! So we sing “Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her king!”

Many African American congregations celebrate this day with special Christmas Day worship services that are designed to celebrate the Savior’s arrival as well as preserve the true theological significance of the day in this commercialized culture which constantly seeks to turn the meaning of this sacred season from the divine to the materialistic, from Godly to greedy.

The worship experience of the African American church on this and every day is designed to contradict the prevailing plethora of cultural paradigms that pull us away from a conscious acknowledgement of the real presence of God with us, around us and for us. The Savior is here with us. Emmanuel means “God with us.” In essence, the incarnation has become a reality. God has taken on the form of human flesh, and now dwells with us in bodily form.

The text is a restatement and reinterpretation of Isaiah 7:14 in the Old Testament but, more importantly, it is the Gospel of the New Testament in condensed form; God is with us in the person of Jesus Christ.¹

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Matthew 1:18-25

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Our current social reality in this country seems to be characterized by blatant non-presence and fear due to economic uncertainty. At the time of this writing, we are in the midst of one of the worst economic melt-downs that we have seen in this country in more than eighty years. Unemployment, failing companies and banks, and homes lost to foreclosure are becoming more common every day. These are hard economic times. And even with government bailouts and stimulus packages, economic hope is dismal at best.

Additionally, the African American community has been continually touched by blatant “non-presence.” This is caused either by willful abandonment of those who could help the less fortunate; or by the de-humanizing actions of those who are present and have power. As I write this commentary, my community in Harlem, New York, is outraged over a from South Carolina who became the first to disrespect a sitting president during a presidential address to Congress. The community my church serves is also plagued by all of the death-dealing activities and behaviors that continue to tear at the fabric of the family unit and the community-at-large.

Juxtaposed with this environment is the joy over having elected the first African American President of the United States of America. President Obama represents hope and change in the midst of these harsh times. Although he has come to office during one of the most difficult periods in our history, this Christmas, as we have been throughout our history when faced with difficult dilemmas, African Americans are hopeful that he will succeed.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

A candid look at this text and all of its nuances raises a number of complex sociological questions when we look at it from our post-modern point of reference. Indeed, it is problematic for any father and/or husband to hear what Joseph is encouraged to accept by the Lord. The woman that he loves and to whom he is engaged is pregnant by someone other than him. He knows he is *not* the biological father because Mary is a virgin, and the two of them have not engaged in pre-marital sex. But the one who has impregnated Mary is not just any other man in the community; it is the Holy Spirit. God has chosen Mary to be the one who will give birth to Jesus, Emmanuel, the Savior of the world. Joseph, not being privy to the entire plan of God as yet, has chosen not to publicly disgrace Mary but chooses to bring an end to the engagement privately and without public humiliation. It is only then that the Lord appears to him and encourages him to marry Mary anyway, because the child that she is carrying was conceived in her by the Holy Spirit of God.

It is interesting that God would choose for Jesus to be born in this way, at this time and in this place. Jesus is born of a young woman who got pregnant by someone other than the man she was engaged to marry. He is also born in a ghetto called Bethlehem and raised in an economically-deprived area known as Nazareth. And, he is born during a time of economic hardship for Joseph and Mary, as indicated by their inability to procure a proper, clean domicile for the birth to take place. For those with enough money, there is always room in an inn. What does it say to us that God chose for Jesus to be born in this way under these seemingly undesirable circumstances?

From Joseph's perspective, he has to accept the fact that his wife-to-be has been impregnated by someone else, and he is *not* the father of the first child that will be reared in their home. He must accept the fact that Mary has not "cheated" on him with another man, because God himself has intervened and explained the circumstances to Joseph personally. In this post-modern era of DNA paternity testing and trying to figure out "Who is the daddy?", can this word from God bring about the kind of reconciliation that will preserve marriages and the family unit? And perhaps more importantly, what are the implications of this story for fathers of today who find themselves in "blended" families where they must rear another man's children in their home? How must we accept, love and care for the children in our home who are not biologically ours?

Mary is truly in a quandary. Not only must Joseph believe these extenuating divine circumstances, but the community and general public will undoubtedly also have a full spectrum of opinions about the situation in which Mary finds herself. What makes this all the more interesting to me is the nuance in Luke's gospel account where the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that this is happening to her because she has found "favor" in God's sight.

What does God's "favor" really mean? Much of the contemporary discussion of God's "favor" seems to center around it usually being positive material, social, or financial blessings that God gives to us without any merit on our part. While that is certainly one aspect of it, this text clearly shows that "favor" or being chosen by God also has costs associated with it, and that every aspect of it is not necessarily positive or affirming from our post-modern perspective.

A miracle, such as being impregnated by the Holy Ghost, may certainly accompany what we call God's "favor." But honest, critical theological reflection certainly reveals to us that anyone who has God's "favor," whether it be Mary in the text or Barack Obama as President of the United

States of America, is also simultaneously burdened with the responsibility to endure the subsequent fallout from the favor. However, the promise of God is true. Emmanuel, God is with us! And not only will we be blessed, but others will be blessed as a result of us yielding to the will of God and accepting His “favor” along with all that it brings to our lives.

Celebration

We celebrate the presence of God through Jesus Christ who is with us under any and all circumstances. Our Emmanuel is here; He’s real, and he is able to sustain us even in dark times! The text also helps us remember that the difficulty of our beginnings do not have to determine our destiny or what God can do through us. God used Mary and Joseph, and God can use you and me.

Descriptive Details:

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sounds: An angel talking to Joseph; and

Sights: A teenage pregnant Mary; Joseph looking determined to quietly dismiss Mary; an angel; and a baby boy named Jesus.

III. Recommended Songs for Worship:

The Praise and Worship Fake Book

“God Is with Us.”

“The King Has Come.”

“You Give Us Life.”

Fill Us With Your Love: Hymns from Africa. By Tom Colvin

“Agape.”

“A Holy Baby.” Ghana folk song

“God, Our Father Sent Jesu.” Angoni tune

“That Boy Child of Mary.” Malawi Melody

Praise Chorus Book. Maranatha Music, Producers

“Emmanuel.” By Bob McGee

“Morning Star.” By Dan Burgess

Baptist Standard Hymnal. Produced by the Sunday School Publishing Board, NBC, USA, Inc., 1969

“Hail, Thou long Expected Jesus.”

African American Heritage Hymnal. Produced by GIA

“Messiah Now Has Come.” Arr. by Nolan Williams Jr.

“Heaven’s Christmas Tree.” By Charles Albert Tindley

Zion Still Sings. Produced by Abington Press

“Already Here.”

“He Came Down.”

JDI Records

“He Has Come.” By Jason White

“Emmanuel.” By Norman Hutchins

F Flat Music

“Jesus Is the Light of the World.” By Butch Heyward

Garpax Music Word Inc. Producers

“Bethlehem Morning.” By Morris Chapman

Israel Houghton & Martha Munizzi

“God Is Here.”

Notes

1. For further information see, Joy to the World: Inspirational Christmas Messages from America's Preachers. Ed. Olivia M. Cloud. New York, NY: Atria Books, 2006.