

“Open Up...Acceptance”

Isaiah 40:1-6, Matthew 1:18-25

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Rev. Jeong Park

Fair Oaks United Methodist Church

The Christmas season is the reminder that God is coming, simply speaking, God shows up “to be with us”! But what does it mean that God is with us? I was ill for almost three weeks due to muscle spasms. I never imagined a situation that I couldn’t move my body when I tried to sit up. For treatment, everyday, I was told to take twelve pain pills with a muscle relaxant. Since I had severe pain for weeks, my doctor also asked me to have an MRI. The MRI results showed ruptured disks at lumbar 3 and 4. That was why I was in severe pain. My doctor gave me a referral to a spine specialist for future medical treatment. Thankfully, my doctor doesn’t think that I am a candidate for surgery. I guess that for some of you, the Christmas season may be the reminder of painful memories or may have brought the unexpected to your life this year as in my case. How can we celebrate in the midst of our struggles?

What does it mean to have a promise, “Emmanuel God, God is with us” when you cannot be joyful, but you have to struggle with illness, your loved one’s death, and life issues that we have to overcome. When I was sick, I was able to reflect more on the meaning of “Emmanuel”. It spoke to me this way: God shows up, especially for those who are struggling in the midst of difficulties. In a different sense, Christmas is God’s special reminder for those who are not peaceful in their hearts, who struggle with uncertainty, and are discouraged in hopelessness and helplessness. In this sense, Christmas should be a joyful gift for those who are hurting.

Let’s look at our New Testament story first. The Gospel of Matthew explains to us how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about. We already know how the story goes: Jesus’ mother Mary was engaged to be married to Joseph. Before they came to the marriage bed, Joseph discovered she was pregnant. (It was by the Holy Spirit, but he didn’t know that.) Joseph was determined to take care of things quietly so Mary would not be disgraced. But this is not the end of the whole story. While Joseph was trying to figure a way out, he had a dream. God’s angel spoke in the dream, “Joseph, son of David, don’t hesitate to get married. Mary’s pregnancy is Spirit-conceived. God’s Holy Spirit has made her pregnant. She will bring a son to birth, and when she does, you will name him Jesus-‘God saves’, and people will name him Emmanuel-Hebrew for ‘God is with us.’”

Since we already know the end of the story, it is easy for us to ignore Joseph and Mary's struggles and the depth of agony in the context of their life. It turns out to be a beautiful and glorious event, but it must have been a painful and difficult moment when they realized that they were going to have someone's baby before their marriage. For example, do you think Mary understood the Angel's prophecy, "do not be afraid, you will conceive the son of God."? Let's rethink this story assuming that we don't know the end and imagine how Mary felt. Mary must have dreaded this situation because according to the Jewish law, anyone who becomes pregnant before marriage was stoned to death. However, the most exciting and joyful life events replace the most miserable and horrible ones. Mary couldn't comprehend the meaning of this birth. How about Joseph? It must have been the same. The unexpected event was very despairing to both of them.

In our New Testament story, what impressed me was Mary and Joseph's attitude. I don't think that they were excited to say "yes" to the angel, but they humbly accepted "the reality" in faith. Sometimes, we experience imperfect situations. We often realize that we are not in charge of our life. Pastor Mike Slaughter gives us an insight on Mary's situation in his book, *Christmas is Not Your Birthday*. At that moment of the angel's visitation, Mary's limited theological understanding of the Messianic promise would not have been at the forefront of her thinking. I am pretty sure that, even after Jesus was born, she had no grasp of who he really was, what his ministry would entail, or what kind of pain she would later endure witnessing his suffering and execution. But we know that Mary and Joseph would choose to serve God even though life didn't make sense to them. When does God come to you? When have you experienced God's grace in your life? Think about God's grace. God's favor cannot be earned. God comes when we do everything wrong. God comes when we are doing nothing. God comes whether we are being naughty or nice. Why? Because God loves us not because *we are perfect*, but *we are highly favored!* Amazingly, when we admit that we are imperfect, God will come and fill the rest.

Our Old Testament reading describes about our Messiah. A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together." Then, what are our valleys in our life? They can be our life issues, difficulties, sufferings and the unexpected that challenge us. And what are our mountains and hills? Our pride, and wish to be in control, and "self-centered." In this season, we are invited to learn how God is working within our valleys

and mountains.

The story of Mary and Joseph is our story. When we open up ourselves and we humbly make a space for God, Emmanuel God will come and be with us. I know that many of us are facing difficult situations. One of our church member's daughter started to receive another Chemo infusion this week. Another member's father is in the final stage of Alzheimer's. We have heard through the prayer chain about people losing their homes. Also people are struggling with their health problems. We need God's comfort and strength.

In this beautiful season of waiting for God's gift, I hope that you pray for God's coming into your lives. Check yourselves first whether you are making a place for God in you. And then invite Emmanuel God to come and fill your empty places. No matter what you are struggling to overcome, God promises that He will be with you! Amen.