

Sermon by John Timmer: "God with Us" from Matthew 1

A number of years ago, somewhere in England, a schoolboy wrote these words in an essay: Why are so many twins born into the world today? I believe it is because little children are afraid of entering the world alone.

That's deep thinking for a schoolboy. This boy pointed his small finger at a big problem, at what some have called the chief problem of the twentieth century: loneliness. And rightly so. For even though loneliness has been a problem in all ages, it is particularly so in our age.

It is particularly our age that has tasted the bitterness of the psalmist's words: "There is no one who takes notice of me; no refuge remains to me; no one cares for me." (Psalm 146:4) And it is particularly during the Christmas holidays that loneliness becomes unbearable for many. Suicides go up during the Christmas holidays. So do homicides. So do family conflicts and heart attacks and natural deaths. The season of the year which is supposed to be joyous in fact lays bare the loneliness that is characteristic of so many lives.

Christmas, it seems, is a time when we want to be loved and when we need to be loved. But all too often it is a season, not of love but of loneliness, not of joy but of pain. People become sick and die or kill themselves at Christmastime because they are convinced that no one loves them, that no one cares.

This Christmas loneliness affects all of us to some extent. It's as though we all feel that while it is a feast of intimate love, there is a possibility that we are going to be excluded from that love.

Our Scripture Lesson has something to say about this. Listen! "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel--which means, God with us." Immanuel! God with us!

Who picked that name? Mary and Joseph didn't. They would never have dreamed of giving their child this name. Parents may pray that God will give them a healthy child. Parents may pray that God will bless their child. But which parents have the audacity of calling their child: "God with us"? That name clearly has to come from God himself. For it is a name in which God commits himself. It is a name in which God commits himself to be our twin...for ever; to be with us...always. Immanuel—that name sums up the heart of the gospel.

That name is Matthew's first and last word about Jesus. Quite literally! For Matthew mentions it in the opening chapter of his Gospel, where he writes: "They will call him Immanuel--which means, God with us." And Matthew mentions it in the closing chapter, where he quotes these words of Jesus: "I am with you always, to the end of the age." All the rest of Matthew's Gospel is written to fill out this opening and closing statement. All the rest of Matthew's Gospel is written to spell out the implications of the name Immanuel. All the rest of Matthew's Gospel is written to show what happens when God is with us.

Take Joseph, for example. This is how Matthew describes Joseph: "Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph ... was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly."

Then God speaks to Joseph in a dream. God says: "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." Joseph is not to walk out on Mary. Joseph's behavior must not be motivated by self-respect, by concern for his own reputation. Rather, Joseph must sacrifice his reputation for the sake of Mary.

That's the kind of thing that happens when you live within the radius of the Immanuel child. In Joseph's case it meant that he accepted Mary with all the unpleasant social consequences that came with it. It meant that he could not doom Mary to a life of shame and loneliness.

Some of you have read Albert Camus's novel The Plague. The scene is a city in North Africa where the plague has broken out. No one may enter the city or leave it for a long period of time. People are dying by the hundreds. Those who survive grow weary and sick at heart.

One of the novel's characters is an old man. While looking into a shop window at Christmas, he thinks despairingly of his wife's face. He has not seen her face for so long and probably will never see it again. The memory of her face brings tears to his eyes.

And then Camus writes these words: "Always there comes an hour when one is weary of one's work and devotion to duty, and all one craves for is a loved face, the warmth and wonder of a loving heart."

How true! How deeply true! All we really crave for is a loved face, the warmth and wonder of a loving heart. Loneliness is not seeing a loved face. Loneliness is not experiencing the warmth and wonder of a loving heart. What every person ultimately needs is a loved face; is the warmth and wonder of a loving heart.

And because God knows this better than anyone else, he sent his Son into our world to be that face, to be that heart. His name will be Immanuel, which means God's loving face with us; God's loving heart with us. From now on, in Jesus, God's face is always there. From now on, in Jesus, the warmth of God's loving heart is always there. Immanuel -- God with us.

Last week I came across a medieval story, a story that is some 500 years old, a story especially meaningful for parents of prodigal children; for parents who wonder whether God is still with their children who have strayed from him. Once upon a time, so the story goes, once upon a time there was a girl whose name was Maria and who, for a period of seven years, lived with the devil. Maria was a very lonely girl. She felt that no one

understood her, that no one loved her. She finally reached the point where she no longer cared who befriended her, just as long as somebody did. "Whether I am befriended by God or by the devil," she said, "I really don't care."

Most often it was the devil who visited her. Under the guise of a handsome boy. "Allow me to comfort you," the handsome boy said, "and I will give you money, jewels, and the most beautiful clothes." "I've only one request," the devil said. "I want you to give up your name. I can never love someone whose name is Maria."

But Maria wouldn't hear of it. "Give up my name? What name is more beautiful than the name Maria, the name of Jesus' own mother?" she said.

But the devil was persistent. "Listen, my dear," he said, "if we are to be friends, you must change your name." "And one more thing," the devil said. "One more thing! I don't want you to make the sign of the cross anymore."

"That's no problem," Maria said. "I promise you that I won't make the sign of the cross anymore." "But give up my name? Never! For the Maria after whom I am named, is a source of comfort."

Then the devil made a compromise proposal. He said: "I'll let you keep the first letter of your name. I'll let you keep the letter M. I'll call you Emmeken (which in medieval Dutch is the diminutive form of M). I'll call you Emmeken." And so there was still one letter, one thread, which tied Emmeken to her past and to God. She held on to this one thread. Or rather, this one thread held on to her, for the strength of it was God's, not hers. After having lived with the devil for seven years, Emmeken came to herself and said: I will get up and return to God. And she did. She got up, and returned to God.

There are so many Emmekens. In my family and in your family. Young and old Emmekens. They no longer make the sign of the cross. They no longer read the Bible or go to church. A very thin thread still binds them to God. But the strength of that thread, remember, is God's. If it weren't for God, that thread would break. Immanuel--God with us. God holding on to us. God not letting go of us.

PRAYER: Lord, we know the words of the Christmas story. Now teach us the wonder and mystery of it. Break through our familiarity with the story and make us stand amazed. For Jesus' sake. Amen.