

Sermon by Leonard VanderZee: "The Sign: Emmanuel" from Matthew 1

This mysterious prophesy and this marvelously promising name, Emmanuel, arise out of the convoluted politics of the 8th century BC. It's always that way it seems. Luke's story of Jesus' birth is anchored in the politics of the Roman Empire and the census under Quirinius. Now, the politics of the Middle East in Isaiah's time looked something like the Balkans today: intrigue, atrocities, and constant warfare. As always in international politics, it was a matter of balance of power. A new super-power was rising in the north, Assyria under Tiglath Pileser, whose cruelty makes Saddam Hussein look like Santa Claus. He was threatening several small kingdoms to the north of Judah. So Pekah, King of Israel, the northern Kingdom, and Rezin, King of Damascus, a bit farther north, want to form a three way alliance with Ahaz, king of Judah, to hold Tiglath Pileser at bay. But Ahaz doesn't want any part of such an alliance. He despises the king of Israel who ascended the throne by murder, and Rezin is just some Gentile potentate. Having failed to form an alliance with Ahaz, Pekah and Rezin are now trying to get rid of him and place a more compliant monarch on the throne of Judah, one who will stand up to Assyria. That's the political situation.

What is Ahaz going to do? What he wants to do is pull off a diplomatic and military stratagem by forming an alliance with Tiglath Pileser, a pact with the devil himself. But there's another possibility. He can rely on God to protect him and his Kingdom. After all, Ahaz was a Davidic King, and God had promised that a descendant of the house of David would sit on the throne in Jerusalem forever. But could Ahaz really rely on anything as flimsy as the promises of God when Pekah and Resin were beginning to lay siege to Jerusalem?

Now into this boiling cauldron of political intrigue Isaiah is called to bring the word of the Lord. Essentially God's message through Isaiah is this: You can trust in the Lord, he will protect you and defeat your enemies. Faith is the key. Isaiah warns, "If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all."

But that's not all. God was willing to shore up Ahaz' faith with a sign. This may not be God's usual way of working, but God seems willing to act on Ahaz' behalf. The promise is astounding. "Ask a sign...as deep as Sheol, or high as heaven." Ahaz sounds pious, "I will not put the Lord to the test." (a quotation from scripture recited by Jesus himself when he was tempted by the devil) But while you may quote scripture to the devil, you don't have to quote it to God. The fact is, Ahaz had his mind made up already, and he didn't want any divine signs interfering with his plans to form an alliance with Tiglath Pilezer of Assyria.

One of the many mysteries of this prophesy is that God was determined to give a sign anyway, despite Ahaz' unbelief. If Ahaz won't choose a sign, then God will give one anyway. "The young woman is with child and shall bear a son and call him Immanuel."

A lot of ink has been spilled over this one enigmatic verse. First of all, is it "young woman", as in the Hebrew Bible or "virgin", as in the Septuagint (a Greek translation of the OT) and quoted by Matthew? Well, the answer is that the Hebrew word is specifically the word for a young woman, who may or may not be a virgin, but it is not the Hebrew word for virgin. The LXX translates this word into the Greek word for virgin. These translators may have been thinking that the woman was a virgin before she

conceived and that therefore this was her first-born child. Whatever the reason, it serves Matthew's purposes in a way neither the original author nor the translators of the LXX could have imagined.

But the bigger problem is what this all means for Ahaz. If this prophesy is a sign to Ahaz, it has to have an immediate, not just a long-term fulfillment. Who was the mother, and who was the child. We have no idea. Probably, somewhere in Israel, maybe even in the Kings family, a child was born and given the name Emmanuel. That child served as God's chosen sign that he would keep his promise. Judah was saved, at least for the time being.

The sign is a baby. In Luke's story of Christmas, it is the shepherds who receive a sign, "And this shall be a sign to you: you shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger". Just as for Ahaz, the sign is the birth of a little child. That's the sign to Ahaz, to the shepherds, and to us.

The problem is that it doesn't prove anything. Oh, if you already believe, then it all seems to make sense. But how does the birth of a child prove to Ahaz that God will deliver him? There are lots of babies born that year in Judah, and any pious mother could name her child Immanuel. Besides, what Ahaz needed was not a baby, but an army!

And that's the way we feel sometimes too. After all the Christmas carols are over, the tree is put back in the box or carried out to the street raining needles all over. The presents are put away, the cards disposed of, and the general holiday cheer subsides. Where are we then? As Mary Irion puts it, "Time goes to work on Christmas. The myths begin to fall apart; quickly or slowly, reality demands its due. Visions of sugarplums turn to hard stares at the selfishness, commercialism, bad taste, insecurity and pretense [of the season]. The fall from innocence splatters itself all over Christmas, dimming the lights of the tree, dirtying the snow. Underneath all the pretty surfaces lie all the same old facts of life: it is winter, the trees are bare, the days are short, people are people, Christ is a plaster doll [in a bathrobe pageant] ."

A child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. What kind of sign is that? We need something we can count on--something that gives us a money-back guarantee that we're going to make it, that history will have a happy ending.

In the middle of telling the story about how the angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, and how Mary was pregnant by the Holy Spirit, and how he should be named Jesus, Matthew seems to suddenly recall that strange prophesy to Ahaz. "All this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'The virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall call him Emmanuel', which means, God with us." Matthew always sees the whole Old Testament finding its purpose, its end, its fulfillment in Christ. And so this obscure prophesy finds its true fulfillment after all those years. The sign is a baby. God's ultimate promise is to be with us.

Two names are given to Joseph, one from the angel, the other from the prophet: Jesus and Immanuel. The first means Savior, the second means, literally, the with-us-God. When you put these names together it signals a reversal in our usual understanding of salvation. We don't think of salvation as having God with us. We would rather think of salvation as our being with God. Being lifted up out of the world. We like to think of the victorious Christian life. We want people who are sick to be healed, homes torn by strife to become instantaneously tranquil, the war-torn world to meet at the peace table.

These are, after all, the hopes and dreams we have been seeing throughout these weeks of Advent in the great mountain peak prophecies of Isaiah. But Jesus (savior) is first revealed as Immanuel (God with us). That means that salvation does not come by an immediate deliverance out of the hard, pain-filled, ambiguous, conditions of this world. That will come later. Salvation is first of all God's descent down to the world he loves.

There are basically two kinds of religion in the world. There's the going up kind and the coming down kind. The going up kind is the most popular. The Above-us-God is holy, untouchable, but by supreme effort we can climb up to that God. When you look closely enough most every religion in the world is the going up kind. The quest for holiness, climbing up to god by following the rules, going through the rituals. It's all going up. There is really only one coming-down religion, and it's the one we celebrate at Christmas. That's the unique glory of Christmas

Initially, at least, being a Christian doesn't save us from a blessed thing on earth. Jesus doesn't save us from grief, or heartache, or injustice, or sickness. Rather, the saving God comes down, down, down, first to a manger, then to a cross. It's not that those wonderful Advent promises of the wolf lying down with the lamb, the swords beat into plowshares and the spears into pruning hooks, and of no one hurting or destroying on all God's holy mountain were false, or merely wish-dreams. Those great promises still shape our destiny as human beings. It's a matter of order, no, more than that, it's a matter of grace. In order for us to live in Shalom, we need to have peace with God and with each other. In order to walk up God's holy mountain we need to be made holy. In order to give us shalom, and in order to make us holy God comes down to us. He shares our broken lives. He bears our sins, and dies our death. In Jesus Christ his Son the holy and totally above-us-God declares, "You are loved! You are accepted! You are forgiven! I have come to join you in this broken world so that you can join me in my Kingdom when it comes." And once we know that God is with us in Jesus Christ, once we know that God is indissolubly married to this planet, then we know that everything will be all right. Once we have seen the sign, Immanuel, we know that the dream will certainly come true.

Walter Wangerin tells us the true story of a woman named Gloria Ferguson. Gloria is an ordinary person who works at the Salvation Army Senior Drop-In Center. She has suffered an ordinary loss, the death of a beloved uncle and friend Sonny Boy, who was like a father to her. Death is ordinary, and loss is common, until it's yours. Then it's not ordinary any more. Wangerin journeys with her as her Pastor through all the twists and turns of her grief, trying to articulate its texture and feel. After some months have gone by and Christmas approaches, Gloria becomes stuck in just plain sadness, she teeters on the edge of despair. And, of course, it affects others she loves. Her teenage son feels so left out that he begins to act out at school, and breaks a window at home. Nothing seems to awaken Gloria.

Finally one of the old men at the Salvation Army Senior Citizen's Center, Mr. Sullivan, calls Pastor Wangerin and asks him to come on down. When he arrives he is surrounded by other old folks. They lead him to a storage room in the basement, Mr. Sullivan stands in the hallway outside and yells out, "Miz Glory, here's yo preacher come to pray with you!" He whispers to the Pastor, "She sits in there when she's feelin lowly".

Wangerin enters a narrow room with just one chair and a desk. Gloria sits at the beat-up desk and doesn't even look up. Through the door they can hear the old folks shushing each other. He apologizes for intruding and offers to go. She says "Don't". "Do you want me to pray?", he asks. "Maybe later".

Wangerin kneels beside her desk and begins to talk about Tommy her son, and why he's acting out so much, how he needs her love and attention. He tells her that God loves her. All Gloria can do is whisper, "where's Sonny Boy?" He has no answer.

Suddenly the silence is broken by a chorus of old voices bellowing and cackling into a song. SILENT NIGHT, they bellow. HOLY NIGHT. The senior citizens have decided they'd help by caroling for Miz Gloria. A little Christmas cheer. ALL IS CALM, ALL IS BRIGHT. Pastor Wangerin isn't at all sure this is the right thing for a woman stuck in grief. Gloria shifts her glance from the floor to the door and back to the floor again. "O dear" she whispers. Her hands cover her face and her shoulders begin to shake and tears begin to fall like rain, soft, cleansing rain.

ROUND JOHN VIRGIN, MOTHER AND CHILD. Gloria stands up, the tears streaming down her face. She goes to the door and opens it. And there are a dozen ancient faces, every color imaginable, HOLY INFANT SO TENDER AND MILD. She stares at these, her old clients and whispers, "Dear, dear, dear". SLEEP IN HEAVENLY PEACE. SLEEP IN HEAVENLY PEACE.

Then old Mr. Sullivan pushes Tommy Ferguson, Gloria's son, to the front, and in his hands is a glorious red poinsettia. Mr. Sullivan announces, "the flower is from all of us, the boy is yours ." Gloria takes it, and then puts it aside. She puts her hands on the side of the boys head and buries his face in her bosom, as a smile begins to spread across her face.

AWAY IN A MANGER NO CRIB FOR A BED--the reedy voices of the old choir rev up once more. Gloria, eyes closed, spreads her nostrils and sings right along. THE LITTLE LORD JESUS LAID DOWN HIS SWEET HEAD.

You shall call his name Emmanuel, God with us. All through the long dark journey of grief, the Lord Jesus has been with her, but she couldn't see it, she couldn't feel it. He was always there. There is no sorrow he hasn't suffered. No death he didn't endure. No loneliness he could not breach. No tears foreign to his face. But Gloria, and we, just can't see it all the time. We are not ready to see it.

The problem is never the absence of God. God is never absent. that's what the sign means. I say it every year, and I say it again, with joy and humility. God has joined the human race. God was born into the human family. Our God is with us. The problem is that we do not see it. Our self-centered, self-pitying, self-absorbed hearts do not see.

But some day, some time, at some strange moment, we are ready to see it. Some grief, some sin, some helplessness or some surprizing grace strips away the arrogance, the pride, the self-sufficiency and we see ourselves as we are, small and needy of God's love. Then we are ready to see the truth that has always been there. The sign is a baby, Emmanuel. Or as Paul put it, "Christ in you, the hope of glory."

Gloria and the ancient choir continue:

I LOVE THEE LORD JESUS, LOOK DOWN FROM THE SKY,
AND STAY BY MY CRADLE TILL MORNING IS NIGH.