

GOD WITH US WHERE?

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Isaiah 7:1-16; Matthew 1:18-25

For those of you who are expecting a child and for those of you who are pondering children's names, here are the most popular baby names of 2016. For boys, the names in order of popularity are: Jackson, Aiden, Lucas and Liam. For girls, the names in order of popularity are: Sophia, Emma, Olivia, and Ava. This is good news to Barbara and Karen's daughters who are Hannah Sophia and Emma, in order of birth, number 1 and 2.

Biblical and religious names are not as popular as they once were. Gabriel is #27, Isaac is #31, Isaiah is 43, Muhammed is 34, Adam is 57, and the girl's name *Mary* did not make the top 100 at all, nor did the boy's name, Emmanuel¹, for that matter. *Jesus* wasn't even mentioned.

I'm not sure how much people go to the Bible any more for names of children, but in Biblical times names were considered powerful. They were indicators of parental expectation for one thing. And to know someone's name was to command their attention.

Names were sometimes changed in the Bible to indicate a new or emerging role that a person might be called to fulfill. Jacob, you'll remember, became Israel. Saul became Paul. Simon became Peter. Each change representing some new element of character that was revealed or exposed as a part of that person's calling.

When Moses asked the voice of the burning bush to give him the name of that unforgettable presence so that he might cite him as the source of his authority, the voice of the bush gave him the tetragrammaton, four letters, no vowels that we translate YHWH (Yahweh). That would be fine but it is an enigmatic name meaning *I will be whom I will be*; or *I am who I am*. It is a cryptic name at best. And it is a dangerous thing to speak that name, because to do so is to command attention and that is presumptuous for mere mortals to exercise such a claim upon God.

There is even a debate among Christian scholars about whether or not preachers and academics should use that name, Yahweh, and especially since the rabbi's when that word appears in the text never say it, but read "Adonai" instead. So, careful how you use that name.

To speak a name is to lay claim to its power.

Isaiah knew the power of a name when he prophesied that a young woman, not a virgin, but a young woman was great with child and the child's name would be called Immanuel. And Matthew echoes the construction of that phrase when he places on the lips of the angel speaking to Joseph that Mary, his betrothed, is great with child, and that he must name him *Jesus*.

David Peterson in the **New Interpreter's Bible** offers a comment on how we are to hear the Isaiah prophecy especially since Matthew some eight centuries later uses Isaiah's words to describe the birth of Jesus. So Peterson writes,

Seen in its historical framework, these verses are an announcement of salvation to the king and the people of Judah concerning the immediate future [in other words in the 8th Century B.C.]. The prophet gives no specific timetable but speaks in terms of the birth and development of the child. Here the good news is carried by the child's name, "Immanuel" (v. 14), "God is with us." Deliverance will come, not through alliances or military might, but through divine intervention, by a God who keeps promises.²

But Peterson is quick to point out that Christians can't help but hear this prophecy and jump forward from the 8th Century B.C. to the 1st Century A.D. even though Isaiah had a specific child and mother in mind contemporary to the time of King Ahaz.

I'm not saying that we need to rule out Isaiah's prophecy as not applicable to Jesus. But it is important to hear Isaiah on his own terms in his own era in history.

Again David Peterson is helpful.

Living with Isa 7:10-16 itself helps interpreters to keep their feet on the ground of history and human experience. The particular kind of good news, proclaimed here by the ancient Israelite prophet should not be forgotten. It is a message that sees pregnancy and birth – even when not understood as miraculous – as signs of God’s concern for God’s people. That good news comes into a world with such concrete problems as international politics and threats of war [writes Peterson]. The fact that the prophet and his message are so directly involved in political events may move us to ask if such expectations as his, along with the message of the coming of Jesus, are legitimate hopes for the people of God. Is the coming of Jesus related to international politics or not. Those who take the full biblical context seriously, including Isa 7:10-16, will conclude that the answer to this question is yes.³

And isn’t that a fascinating suggestion, that perhaps more than Isaiah could realize from his vantage point in the 8th Century B.C., perhaps he was speaking of Jesus more than he could have possibly known, and more perhaps of every child in every place that has ever been born, a sign of the love and power of God to change the world. And isn’t this a Christmas when we have children in mind.

I am thinking especially today of the children of the world who are in harm’s way, of five-year-old Omran Daqneesh, the little Syrian boy sitting in the back of the ambulance, pulled from the rubble of his home in Aleppo, a small, silent, solitary figure, seated in the ambulance, bloodied and dazed, a child surviving the mess we have made, we who are older and all grown up.

I am thinking of little two-year-old, Aylan Kurdi, whose body washed up on the Turkish shoreline a year ago the refuse of an indifferent war that has abandoned its children. His mother and brother were also drowned trying to flee the warfare around them.

I am thinking of the fifty or so orphans, hiding underground in an eastern Aleppo orphanage and ten-year-old Yasmeen Qanouz, pleading on their behalf. A girl who has been in the orphanage for the past two years since her parents were killed in an air strike on their home.

This is the modern slaughter of the innocents about which we read in Matthew’s gospel when the political scene changes and the magi do not return to Herod. In retaliation and fear Herod kills all the children 2 years old and younger in Bethlehem, according to the time that the magi had told him. And so Matthew quotes another of the prophets⁴,

A voice was heard in Ramah,
Wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children,
She refused to be consoled.⁵

To see, as we have, in these recent weeks the calloused indifference to the lives of children, the elderly, and all the people of Syria and Iraq as if somehow war were acceptable if you are not a child or old. How can we not be moved by the tragedy and sadness of this?

Some years ago, in my first years in ministry someone said something to me about Christmas being for children and I thought about that for weeks afterward. The person who said that meant that it was a time for sugar plum fairies, and lots of toys and an imaginary Santa and helper elves.

The more I thought about it, the angrier I became. I was twenty-something in those days, and I knew a lot more then than I do now, and I was much more sure of it.

Of course, there’s no getting around how in this country we do make a lot out of Christmas being for children. All the animated stories of Santa and the movies about the *The Polar Express* and the *The Wizard of Oz* shown countless times in these pre-Christmas days. The multiple versions of Scrooge and Dicken’s *A Christmas Carol*. The toys all wrapped in colorful paper. And “Hatchimals” the toy of the season at Toys R’ Us and Target and Walmart if you camp outside all night waiting for a shipment.

Grandparents go to the ends of the earth and spend everything they have to make sure that their grandchildren have all the toys and goodies that they can. So I get what it means to say that Christmas is for children. We splurge on them to make it so.

But of course, it isn't just about children in some sugar candy fantasy. Not at its heart. Because Christmas is not about presents and overpriced trees, and ornaments from Hallmark, or cards from friends with way too many catch-up stories of travels and births and passages of the last year. It's not about the catalogs that clog our mailboxes, or the Harry and David's pear and jam deliveries that come rolling in by UPS.

Christmas at its heart is a very adult season, preceded by a very contemplative and thoughtful Advent meant to help us prepare the way in the desert of our heart a highway for our God. Christmas is about a God who takes on human flesh and becomes one of us; a great mystery I tell you. Because hidden beneath the glitter and glitz and too much drinking and too much merry making is an incarnational mystery that is every bit as inexplicable and puzzling as is Easter. And I mention Easter intentionally, because there would be no Christmas if there were no Easter.

It is the affirmation of God's great love for us made manifest in God's triumph over death that makes Jesus' birth exceptional. Were it not for the resurrection Jesus would have simply been a number in the census in the little town of Bethlehem that year, or one of many executions on a lonely hill outside Jerusalem's wall in the Passover season, a regrettable death but these things happen to blasphemers and the seditious, which is all Jesus would have been, along with being a sage rabbi, were it not for the resurrection.

Our faith all boils down to a name, really, a name that Isaiah prophesied and Matthew eight centuries later said was claimed and fulfilled in the birth of an exceptional child, a child who would be known as Emmanuel, *God With Us*.

That is the heart and the soul of Christmas, that God is with us in this life, has joined us in this mess, was born a babe carried in a mother's womb, given life in a cow's stall, birthed in the most meager of circumstances, brought into the world a refugee, smuggled by night to a safe place across borders, taking his first breath in an occupied land, poverty stricken and born to a couple not married, only betrothed. How odd is this God to choose such a child?

And can't you just see him in the faces of Omran Daqneesh, and Aylan Kurdi, and Yasmeen Qanouz? Can't you just see him in the face of the Mexican child whose parents came here years ago and whose infant was born here, a citizen of this land, they who have been enrolled on the tax rolls but are still undocumented?

Can't you see him in the face of the old prophet, looking to the young woman great with child and crying out "Emmanuel?"

I was wrong all those years ago when I was so smart, using the one Sunday in Advent I had as a young associate pastor to correct the voice of a parishioner I had heard say that Christmas is for children as if it were not for us who are grown up as well.

I was right and I was wrong, because Christmas is for all of us. For the child who is well off and who is lucky enough to have toys and treats and visions of sugarplums dancing in their heads. And it is for the child sitting in the back of the ambulance, dug out of the ruins, covered in dust and blood, shell shocked and waiting to be bandaged and taken away to safety.

Christmas is for the child who has washed up on the shore, dying in his mother's arms fleeing the worst that adults can do in forcing families to seek asylum.

Christmas is for teenagers who are struggling with pressures to be accepted, to be liked, to look good enough not to be noticed and yet to be noticed.

Christmas is for lovers who find the love of God in the goodness of sharing life, its ups and downs, with someone good.

Christmas is for the couple who want to have a family and aren't having much luck while all around them friends are getting pregnant the old fashioned way and not having any problems with it at all to look at them from the outside.

Christmas is for the couple who are barely holding it together in this season when there is too much drinking, and too many prescription drugs mixed in, and some that are not, and where the children in the family see it all but have no words to describe their feelings, only acting out.

Christmas is for those who grieve and are lonely and having a hard time, and can't get to the last verse of "I'll be home for Christmas," "even in their dreams", because *home* is in the past and Christmas just isn't the same kind of time anymore as time runs out.

Christmas is for the older ones who aren't all they used to be, eyes not quite as clear, bones more fragile, friends not there, family long gone or far away. Christmas seems a lonely time full of memories long ago.

I was right and I was wrong, Christmas is not just for children. It's for all of us. That part is right. And this part is true... Christmas is *Emmanuel*, the mystery and the wonder at the heart of all things... that God is with us, come to us in flesh and blood, known our joys and known our sorrows, known our laughter and our tears, known our courage and our fears.

So take heart. The world is going to be a little mad this coming week, in a crazy kind of way. Too much tinsel, too much merriness, too much for the kids, too much for us all.

But now you know the heart of it, the good news of a promise about to be fulfilled. A young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and he will be our grounding and our hope, our comfort and our joy. For he will be with us, even one of us. And his name shall be Emmanuel. God with us.

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¹ Source: www.BabyCenter.com

² David Peterson, **The New Interpreter's Bible**. Vol. VI. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001. 112.

³ Peterson, 113.

⁴ Jeremiah 31:15

⁵ Matthew 2:18