

IS THIS ALL WE GET?

Advent 4: Name him Emmanuel
Matthew 1:18-25; Isaiah 7:10-16

Why does the Christmas story affect us so?

This story of the babe in a manger,
brought into the world in the most lowly of circumstances?

Why does it move us so deeply?

Even though we've heard it *hundreds* of times.

If you were here last Sunday evening
and saw the children present their musical version of the story,
then you heard Ross admit in front of the whole congregation
that it brought tears to his eyes.

And it does that to him *every year*.

And to lots of other people.

Around Christmastime,

even the most hardened hearts are prone to get a little mushy.

Not only do they tear up at Christmas carols.

People reach out to each other,
they help each other more.

They are infused with just a bit more hope than usual,
at least *many* of them are.

Why?

We must *expect* this to happen.

Because the Christmas story, more than anything else,
is a story of hope.

At least, that's what we *sing*:

To us a child of hope is born.

The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

Come, thou long-expected Jesus . . . hope of all the earth thou art

But when you stop to think about it,

Where, exactly, do we *find* the hope in this simple story?

What is it about this story of a baby being born in a stable
that would give us hope to face the problems and pains
of life in this complex and broken world?

And how would we be made strong, courageous, hopeful

by hearing about a babe in Bethlehem,
and Mary and Joseph,
and the shepherds and angels and wise men?

Well, it depends what *kind* of hope we are looking for.

If, like most over-stressed and anxious Americans,

I'm looking for an emotional pick-me-up

to get me through the next project or deadline,

or help me survive a relationship crisis,

or the stress of making the next mortgage payment,

or just to get through the pressure-cooker we call Christmas,

then the kind of hope we are looking for is very easily found.

It's being sold by the box, in every Hallmark store.

The traditional Christmas story, packaged by our culture,

with Jesus in the stable,

the shepherds in the fields,

the angels in the sky,

and the wise men on camels,

is all about communicating feelings of

peace, warmth, good-will, nostalgia,

and a sentimental, optimistic, therapeutic hopefulness.

You can buy it today,

in any store at any mall or any big box shopping center.

Take your pick.

This version of hope is *on sale* everywhere.

You know, there's a lot of people who complain that our culture
has taken Christ out of Christmas.

That's *simply not true*.

We've added a lot of other things *to* Christmas—

Santa and Rudolph and Frosty and Charlie Brown.

But Jesus is still there in the middle of it all.

Go *anywhere* in town. Pick a spot, and look around.

You'll see some image of Christ.

In a front yard manger scene.

In a storefront window display.

Flip through channels on your TV,

surf the web and YouTube,

or pick up one of those old-fashioned
newspapers or magazines.
You're going to see Jesus.

We haven't taken Christ out of Christmas.
We've taken the radical gospel story of Christmas . . . out of *Christ*.
The popular Christ of Christmas,
is a cheap substitute for the Christ of the Gospel.
But you *know*, when I *think* about it,
that life-size baby Jesus in somebody's front yard,
with a light bulb glowing inside—
is actually a perfect picture of the Jesus
most Americans see at Christmas.
Hollow. And plastic.

We've taken this story *out* of its biblical context,
and made it something easy to listen to.
But you put the Bible back *into* the Christmas story
and it's anything *but* warm and peaceful.
As the Bible story unfolds,
something happens to *every significant character* in the story,
that scares the bejeebers out of them.
It's *true*.
Joseph trembled with fear, and obsessed about it in his dreams.
That was *today's* Gospel reading.
Mary ran off and took shelter with cousin Elizabeth.
Zechariah was struck mute for nine months for not believing.
The shepherds were terrified.
The mighty King Herod went into a panic over it.
The wise men had a bad dream.
How many times did poor angel Gabriel have to repeat himself,
“*Fear not! Don't be afraid!*”
It's alright, *really!* Calm down!

We forget how deeply frightening this story was.
And how profoundly disturbing.
We just heard Matthew's version of the story.
Unlike Luke, who gives us picturesque details,
Matthew is spare with words.

He mentions almost in passing that Mary bore a son,
and he was named Jesus.
But he uses lots of ink to tell us of Joseph's terrible dilemma.
The news that Mary was having a baby,
was, for *Joseph*, a moral crisis of huge proportions.
It put Joseph's reputation at risk,
but even *worse*, would cause Mary to suffer public disgrace.
So Joseph decided to do the honorable thing,
actually a *courageous* thing,
considering Joseph thought Mary was being unfaithful.
He planned to divorce her quietly.
But the angel appears in a dream to Joseph,
and says, “*Don't be afraid*.
Take Mary as your wife.
She was conceived of the Holy Spirit.”
So Joseph takes an even *greater* risk,
and completes the marriage arrangements as directed.

That's just one example,
of the many disturbing pieces to this story.
We won't even get *into* the matter of Herod,
and his massacre of innocent children,
because he felt threatened by Jesus' birth.
Or the politically-charged prophecy
the angel Gabriel gave to Mary.
Or the radical, revolutionary words to Zechariah's song,
and Mary's song.
So where did we get the idea that this story
was all sweetness and serenity and silence at night?

This story is *not* all about hopeful and peaceful feelings
for someone's stressed-out psyche
It's a message of radical hope and restoration
for a broken world.
It's a message that violence and oppression and human suffering
carried out by the enemy of God, the Prince of Darkness,
will *not* get the *last word*.
It's a message of hope and redemption,
not *just* for the individual human heart,

but for the collective . . . human . . . condition.

Right at the time when things in the world look most hopeless,
most desperate,
God sends a sign.
Not an army. Not a political hero.
A sign.

Remember the reading from Isaiah 7?

King Ahaz and the nation of Judah are facing total destruction.
Their own Hebrew people to the north, the nation of Israel,
team up with Syria,
and together they are about to beat down the gates of Jerusalem.
Ahaz doesn't stand a chance.
Prophet Isaiah says, "Ask for a sign from God."
Ahaz refuses.
Isaiah says, "Okay, the Lord will give you a sign anyway.
A young woman is pregnant, and will give birth to a son,
and will name him Immanuel."

That's the sign. A pregnant woman.

Two powerful armies are outside the gates of Jerusalem.
In a matter of days, Ahaz and the people of Judah will be crushed.
And the prophet's sign of hope, is that some months from now
a baby will be born, named Immanuel.
As signs from God go, that's pretty underwhelming.
Noah got a rainbow.
Moses got a burning bush.
Elijah got fire from heaven that burned up water.
Hezekiah got the sign of the sun going backwards in the sky.

But don't feel too sorry for Ahaz.

There's actually something powerful in this sign—
that a woman will give birth and name her son Immanuel,
meaning "God with us."
Immanuel . . . "*God is with us.*"
When things are hopeless. Immanuel.
When the situation is desperate. Immanuel.
The promise of God to Ahaz is *not* immediate miraculous rescue.

Immanuel does *not* mean, "Hold on tight,
I'm coming in now. I'll get you out of there."
Immanuel means, "I am with you. Trust me in this."
The more Ahaz can let go of his need to control the outcome,
the more Ahaz will experience Immanuel, the presence of God.
But the more he grasps, and clings,
and protects himself and the kingdom he thinks belongs to him,
the more likely Ahaz is going to *miss out* on Immanuel.
He will never *know* God is with him,
so long as he clings to himself and his possessions and his power.

This whole situation, and this prophesy,
was essentially repeated 700 years later.
Once again the Jewish people were in bondage,
were being brutally oppressed,
and were burdened by a crushing sense of hopelessness.
This time it was Caesar and the Roman Empire,
instead of King Rezin and the Syrian Empire.
But the same, underwhelming sign of hope was given:
A young pregnant woman will give birth to a baby.

The oppressed people in Jesus' day
were *looking* for a savior.
They were looking for someone to take charge of the situation *now*.
They were looking for someone to overpower Caesar,
on Caesar's terms.
They were looking for a savior,
just not the *kind* of savior they *got*.

At one time or another you've heard the brutal honesty of a young child,
opening up a disappointing Christmas present—
new underwear, maybe.
"Is *this* all I *get*?"
That must have been the reaction of King Ahaz to Isaiah,
or the people of Israel to Angel Gabriel,
"Is *this* all we *get*?"
A helpless, vulnerable baby with an uncertain future?

You call *this* a gift of hope?

Yes, actually, I *do*.

Because I am deeply moved by a God who—
rather than manipulating the world
and forcing us all into obedient submission—
would *choose*, out of a pure love,
to join us in the middle of our mess,
to be with us *in* it,
to experience it all first-hand,
and sacrifice all, in order to redeem it.

It seems to me that “God-with-us”
is as good as it gets in this life.
Immanuel—“God-with-us”—doesn’t mean an end to evil.
It doesn’t mean we will be rescued from the bad things that happen.
It doesn’t mean we can expect our circumstances will always
change for the better.
It means, *instead*, that God has chosen—and *continues* to choose—
to enter into our circumstances with us,
and then act to redeem those circumstances.
God present with us. God in-carnate . . . in flesh.
The ultimate gift.
God chose *not* to look on us from afar.
But to join us.
To enter into the darkness *with* us.

What a wonder!

What love!

God’s action to come be with us, was an act of supreme love.
God’s deepest love for humanity
was contained, as it were, in that child in the manger.
But it wasn’t just a “feel-good” kind of love.
It wasn’t God’s way of passing out warm fuzzies.
God’s love was a purposeful love.
It was love with a mission.
It was love that confronted evil.
It was love that brought healing to the broken
and salvation to the lost.
Through this child Jesus,

God intended to love the world into wholeness.
That’s more powerful than *any* weapon
we might be tempted to pick up
to confront the enemy on our *enemy’s* terms.

And, *remember*,
the sign of hope when it was given, was an infant.
How fitting! Complete, yet *incomplete*.
A baby is fully, completely, human.
All the genes, all the DNA, it’s *all there*.
Yet incomplete. In fact, hardly begun.
Hope, like an infant, grows.
It takes time.
It takes work.
It takes some pain for hope to grow.
The gift of God’s presence in that baby in the manger,
is only a *beginning*.
God will continue to be with us in all the darkness yet to come.
God’s light and life will *continue* to grow in us.

The world we live in is still full of fear. Full of anxiety.
We don’t *need* all the answers and solutions *now*.
We need a sign.
And God has *given* us that sign.
A child called “Immanuel”, *God with us*.
Let’s invite that hope to come to us again,
as we sit in silent meditation.

—Phil Kniss, December 19, 2010