

Isaiah 7:10-16
Psalm 80:1-7
Romans 1:1-7
Matthew 1:18-25

Sermon for 12/18/22

EMMANUEL

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: God is with us.

In the Bible, angels often appear as agents of God's providence, as manifestations of God's hand in shaping the destiny of His creation. Think of the angel who wrestled with Jacob, the angels blocking the way back into Eden, the angels who counseled Gideon and Abraham, and there are many others.

Our Bible offers us two different Nativity accounts, and in each of them, the visitation of an angel plays a pivotal part. In each of them, an angel, a messenger from God, brings a revelation from God that gives direction to someone being asked to participate in the unfathomable providence of God.

Luke tells us how the angel Gabriel visited the young virgin Mary and told her that she would become pregnant by the Holy Spirit of God without ever having known a man.

The second is the one from Matthew that comprises our gospel reading for today. So let's read it together.

Matthew 1: 18-25

In both angelic visitations, the recipients – Mary and Joseph – learn that the baby in Mary's womb will share the very nature of God's own Holy Spirit. And it is that assurance that convicts them, that leads to Mary's acceptance of her strange fate, and that changes Joseph's mind about breaking off his engagement with his young betrothed. What we'll talk about today is what that conviction actually consisted in, what that promise would have meant to them, to Mary and Joseph.

All of us, living in the aftermath of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus have a new and deeper and richer understanding of the Holy Spirit. But that

doesn't mean that the understanding that Mary and Joseph would have had was wrong, only that there was yet more to be learned.

And even today, in going back and thinking about that earlier understanding, I think we may profit from being reminded of the wonder that Mary and Joseph must have felt, as they received this revelation from God about the nature of this great gift of the Christ child which they were going to give to the world on the very first Christmas. What was there in the promise of the Holy Spirit being brought into their world that gave them assurance, that gave them confidence, that gave them courage, and that gave them strength?

According to the Jewish understanding, which would have been what the promise meant to Mary and Joseph, the Holy Spirit had four very definite functions.

The first was that the Holy Spirit was the agent of God who brought God's truth to men and women. God Himself was remote and ineffable, beyond reach and beyond understanding. Even to look at God was to die. The Holy Spirit was, as it were, the agent through whom God translated Himself into human terms and human understanding. It was the Holy Spirit who taught the prophets and the other teachers of Israel what to say, and through them it was the Holy Spirit who taught the children of God what to do and how to live. It was the Holy Spirit who, throughout the ages and the generations, brought God's truth to men and women.

So then, the promise to Mary and Joseph is that their baby Jesus would be the one person who would bring to men and women the truth about God. Can you imagine the reassurance that must have provided to this thirteen or fourteen year old woman, and this teenage man?

And of course, that promise was fulfilled. Jesus came to tell us what God is like, and what God means to us. In Him alone, we can see what God is and what men and women ought to be. Before Jesus came, people had only vague and shadowy, and often quite wrong, ideas about God: they could at best grope and guess; but Jesus could say, "He who has seen me has seen the Father." (John 14: 9) In Jesus, we see the compassion, the mercy, the courage, the unselfishness, the purity and, above all, the sacrificial love that is the essence of who God is. And in addition, in the perfect humanity of Jesus, we see who we were all intended to be, and what we shall all someday become. We see what true human goodness is, true human beauty, true human love. Jesus came to teach us the truth about God and the truth about ourselves.

Second, the Jews believed that the Holy Spirit not only brought God's truth to us, but also enabled us to recognize that truth when we saw it. We're all familiar with what that means. You know how, when you're a child and you're learning

arithmetic, there comes a moment when you not only know that something is so, but you **see** that it **must** be so. That moment when you're not just reciting the multiplication table from memory – $3 + 4 = 7$ – but that you see how that must be so, how it couldn't possibly not be so!

That ability, not just to see the truth, but to recognize the truth, was the gift of the Holy Spirit, in the Jewish way of thinking. And that's exactly what Jesus provides as well. When during his ministry, he cured people of blindness, he was certainly giving them back their ability to see the physical world around them. But Jesus said over and over again that we should regard his actions as signs, signs of something much deeper.

When he opens the eyes of the physically blind, he's giving us a sign, a sign pointing to the veil he came to lift from spiritual blindness. He not only brings the truth, he offers the ability to see the truth, the heavenly truth, the heavenly reality.

At the very end of John's gospel, when doubting Thomas finally meets the risen Christ, Thomas cries out, "My Lord and my God." Thomas, who had always seen Jesus with human eyes, suddenly sees him with heavenly eyes. He has now not only seen the truth, but he has also known the truth, and that truth has set him free, set him free forever.

And exactly so, when Jesus comes into our hearts. He opens our eyes to see things truly. He shows us the true poverty of material riches, the true glory of humility, the true royalty of the nursing aide singing softly as she tends to the needs of her elderly patient.

Third, the Jews specially connected the Spirit of God with the work of creation. It was through the Holy Spirit that God performed his creating work. At the beginning of the book of Genesis, we're told that the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters and chaos became a coherent world. Psalm 33 teaches us: *By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their starry host by the spirit of his mouth. "The Spirit of God has made me," says Job, "and the breath of the almighty gives me life."*

The Holy Spirit is the creator of the world and the giver of life. So, then, in Jesus there came into the world God's own life-giving and creating power. As John put it in his gospel: *All things were made through Jesus, and without him nothing was made that was made (1: 3)* Can you imagine how that promise, coming from an angel, must have both humbled and uplifted both Mary and Joseph?

And of course, that promise was fulfilled. That which reduced the primal chaos to order, came to bring order to our own disordered lives. That power, which

breathed life into that in which there was no life, came to breathe life into our weaknesses and frustrations. We could put it this way: we are not really alive until Jesus enters into our lives.

And fourth and finally, the Jews especially connected the Spirit, not only with the work of creation, but with the work of re-creation. Ezekiel draws his grim picture of the valley of dry bones, then goes on to tell how the dry bones came alive, and then he hears God say: *I will cause spirit to enter into you, and you shall live (37: 1-14)*

And exactly so, Jesus raised the daughter of Jairus back to life, gave the widow of Nain back her son, and summoned Lazarus back from the grave. And these were again signs. Signs of what?

Signs of what Jesus can do in our own lives. He can bring to life again the soul which is dead in sin; he can revive again the ideals which have died; he can make strong again the will to goodness which has perished, restore the innocence that has been lost or abandoned. He can renew life, when men and women have lost everything that gave their lives meaning.

The essence of Matthew's story is that in the birth of Jesus the Spirit of God came fully into this world as a human being. It is the Spirit who brings God's truth to men and women; it is the Spirit who enables them to recognize that truth when they see it; it is the Spirit who is God's ongoing creative force in the new creation; and the Spirit who alone can re-create the human soul when it has lost the life it ought to have.

And so our sermon prayer for this morning, Father, is that you open our hearts and minds and souls to the indwelling of your Holy Spirit, who is the source of life and light and truth, as he did the heart and mind and soul of a baby born in a manger in Bethlehem, many years ago, for we pray in that Baby's precious name. Amen.