

God With Us

Matthew 1: 18-25 (December 18, 2022)

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18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah* took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ 22 All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

23 ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel’, which means, ‘God is with us.’ 24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son and he named him Jesus.

Historical Context

First century marriages were economic arrangements between honorable fathers for the primary purpose of producing legitimate male heirs for the husband’s household. Spouses may well have come to love each other, but love wasn’t the reason for the marriage. So, the marriage between Mary and Joseph had been arranged and was already “legal,” which is why Joseph is referred to as Mary’s husband. But Mary hadn’t yet gone to live with him (he might have needed to finish living quarters or an apprenticeship).

Theme: God With Us

The words of the prophet provide us, as readers, with more information about Jesus than just his name. This Jesus, the Messiah, is Emmanuel — God with us (see also Matthew 28:20). This may prompt us to ask, where has God been? Isn’t God always with us? An answer to this question is lodged in the genealogy, which wends its way through patriarchs, women, and kings to the Babylonian exile. It is here that the story leaves off before the appearance of Jesus the Messiah. Wherever God has been or may be, the people (Jesus’ people) are in exile — in Babylon, in Rome (called “Babylon” in early Christian literature). And they are waiting to be delivered from the missteps that have landed them there.

These people are our ancestors by faith. Like them, wherever we find ourselves, we are waiting to be delivered from our sense of God’s absence to a time and place where we know that God is with us. This doesn’t necessarily mean it will be a place of certainty, when and where we know the whole story. Instead, it will be a place where we will be invited to respond to what we see in front of us with righteousness that does not seek to disgrace, and to even change direction when new information enables us to see more than we could see before.

The birth of Jesus, the Messiah, opens our eyes to this time and place. Not the birth of a baby, but of our awareness of God with us: A generative space in which to grow.

