

1

Have you ever had one of those nights when you toss and turn, worrying about something that happened during day? The next day you wake up, exhausted from the struggle of the night, and you might mutter, “What a night! I hope today goes better!”

I imagine that’s the kind of night Joseph experienced after learning that his wife-to-be, Mary, was expecting a baby, and knowing that it was not his child, Joseph struggled to decide what to do, possibly tossing and turning all evening, finally deciding to quietly end their relationship.

Suddenly a messenger from God appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from God.” The angel told him to name the baby Jesus, and then the narrator, Matthew, connected this event to the prophet Isaiah from the ancient Hebrew scriptures. The prophet had said, “A young woman shall bear a son and will name him Emmanuel.”

The name Emmanuel means in the Hebrew language, “God is with us.” Hundreds of years before Mary and Joseph, Isaiah received a message about a young woman having a baby and naming him Emmanuel. Isaiah saw the birth of this child as a sign of hope, for their world was a mess.

During Isaiah’s time, several nations had attacked Jerusalem, and King Ahaz was trying to find a political ally to help, so he prepared a nice gift of gold and silver from the temple treasury, sent it to the king of Assyria and said, “I am your servant. Come and rescue me.” King Ahaz even revamped the worship space in the temple to look like the Assyrian’s worship space.¹ It would be as if today we took money from our church’s general fund to make political alliances with certain presidential candidates, and then we redesigned the worship space to look like the White House Oval Office.

Isaiah had warned King Ahaz that this political alliance was not a good idea, but the king did not listen. In the midst of all the chaos, Isaiah offered a

2

simple sign of hope: a young woman giving birth to a child, something that happened all the time. The birth would be a reminder that “God is with us.” In all the confusion, something ordinary would remind them they were not alone.

Seven hundred years later people continued longing for that same hope. The Assyrians were no longer in control as in Isaiah’s day, but now in the midst of the chaos of the Roman government, when violence and corruption still filled their world, Joseph’s dream envisioned a sign of hope that would be born from a young woman. Matthew echoed the hope from generations earlier by using the same name that Isaiah used: Emmanuel, “God is with us.”

Although another man named Joseph, Joseph Mohr, never used the name Emmanuel, the words he wrote 200 years ago also spoke of hope in “Silent Night.” He wrote the words during a difficult time in Austria’s history at the end of the Napoleonic wars. After asking a neighboring church organist to write a melody, they encountered a

problem on Christmas Eve: the church organ was broken. Instead, the song was first accompanied by guitar, giving it the sound of a lullaby, something comforting on that silent night.²

Whether 200 years ago when “Silent Night” first appeared, or 2000 years ago when Jesus was born, or 2700 years ago when Isaiah envisioned a baby that would bring hope to the world, we know that Emmanuel, God is with us.

Sometimes we find that hard to believe, that God entered our world through a small baby. Why would God want to experience the struggles of this world? Writer Max Lucado

tells about his neighbor who was trying to teach his six-year-old son how to shoot a basketball. They were out in the backyard. The father shot a couple of times, saying, “Do it just like that, son; it’s real easy.” The little boy tried very hard but he couldn’t get the ball ten feet into the air. The little fellow got more and more frustrated. Finally, after hearing his father talk about how easy it was for the tenth time, the boy said, “It’s

3

easy for you up there. You don't know how hard it is from down here.”³

Often, we may find ourselves saying a similar thing to God while in prayer. *God, it's easy for you to give us suggestions about what to do, but do you really know how hard it is to make decisions in this complicated life? Do you really know the struggles we endure?* Yes, that's why God came in the ordinary birth of a baby and grew to adulthood in this world, for God does know how difficult our lives are. God came as Emmanuel, a small baby born into a struggling world. Nothing about Jesus' entrance into the world was easy—no room in the inn and a jealous king searching to have him killed. And, as we know, Jesus' life did not get any easier, for at the end of his life, he suffered an agonizing death on a cross.

Life doesn't always go the way we desire, and some nights we may mutter, “What a night!” But even when our lives go astray, God always offers us another option, a vision of hope, as so well shown in a Christmas play as children dramatized:

the story of Mary and Joseph coming to the inn. In that class was one little boy who wanted very much to be Joseph. But when the parts were handed out, his biggest rival was given that part, and he was assigned to be the innkeeper instead. He was really bitter about this.

So, during all the rehearsals he kept plotting in his mind what he might do the night of performance to get even with his rival who was Joseph.

Finally, the night of the performance, Mary and Joseph came walking across the stage. They knocked on the door of the inn, and the innkeeper opened the door and asked them gruffly what they wanted.

Joseph answered, “We'd like to have a room for the night.” Suddenly the innkeeper threw the door open wide and said, “Great, come on in and I'll give you the best room in the house.”

For a few seconds poor little Joseph didn't know what to do, and a long silence ensued. Finally, though, thinking quickly on his feet,

④

Joseph looked in past the innkeeper, first to the left and then to the right and said, “No wife of mine is going to stay in a dump like this. Come on, Mary, let’s go to the barn.” And once again the play was back on course.⁴

When your life gets off course, Emmanuel, God is with you, offering another direction.

In those times when we feel bitter, Emmanuel, God is with us, offering healing.

Even if we plot against those we don’t like, Emmanuel, God is with us, offering us the opportunity for reconciliation.

When nations fight with one another, Emmanuel, God is with us, offering a vision of peace.

When children die at the border of our nation, Emmanuel, God is with the crying parents.

When we lose a job and struggle to pay bills, Emmanuel, God is with us.

When our health declines or those we love are hospitalized, Emmanuel, God is with us.

For God loves us more than you can ever imagine and offers you an abundance of hope. Even on the nights when you toss and turn and exclaim, “What a night,” Emmanuel, God is with us. That is the best Christmas gift we could ever receive...God with us... always...Emmanuel.

¹ See 2 Kings 16 for background.

² Emily McFarlan Miller, “Why ‘Silent Night’ and the Stories Around it Endure 200 Years Later,” www.christianheadlines.com/blog/why-silent-night-and-the-stories-around-it-endure-200-years-later.html

³ Bill Bouknight, Collected Sermons, www.Sermons.com.

⁴ Brett Blair, www.eSermons.com. Adapted from a Story by John Simmons.