

The "With Us" God
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The English essayist Charles Lamb was visiting with some friends on one occasion when the question was asked how he would feel if some of the greatest among the dead were to appear, suddenly in the flesh again.

One asked how he would feel if Christ were to enter the room?

Lamb's countenance changed at that question and as was his manner when deeply moved, he stuttered:

You see if Shakespeare entered we would all rise; but if Jesus appeared we would all kneel.

For Eleven years a brilliant upper-class scholar searched the N.T. documents looking for inconsistencies in the life, character and teaching of Jesus. So many of his friends had become Christians that he determined to prepare a brochure exposing the fallacies of believing in Christ. Not only did he fail to discover any inconsistencies but he became convinced that Jesus was who he claimed to be - God in the flesh - and he too became a Christian.

Jesus, his personality, his character, his conduct stand out uniquely among all the people of history.

There is about him a moral excellence that disallows even thoughtful critics of Christianity from being critical of him.

The statement of One Solitary Life says it so well"

He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman.

He grew up in another village, where he worked in a carpenter shop until he was thirty.

Then for three years he was a traveling preacher.

He never wrote a book, he never held an office

He never had a family or owned a home.

He didn't go to college, he never visited a big city.

He never traveled 200 miles from the place where he was born

He did none of the things that usually accompany greatness.

He had no credentials but Himself.

But as Charles Spurgeon , the famous English Preacher wrote:

Jesus is the great central fact of human history.

To him everything looks forward or backward.

All lines of history converge on Him.

I don't remember people talking about the meaning of names when I was a child or young person.

Some of us were called Jerry, some Mary, some Thomas or John, but I don't remember anyone ever telling what the name meant.

Oh, we were named after parents or grandparents or named just because the name sounded nice or for many other reasons but I don't think often it was because of what the name signified.

Along around the 70s as I recall there was a resurgence of naming children because of what the name meant.

There were books published that told you what your name stood for.

Some of those meanings sounded awfully contrived to me.

Gerald - Hunter of white deer.

I think the practice has waned in more recent years.

There was a time, centuries ago, when a name had tremendous significance.

A child's name would be carefully chosen to make a statement to the child as he/she grew or on some occasions to make a statement to others.

In ancient Israel, when the Ark of the Covenant was captured in battle by the Philistines and her husband was killed, The Priest Eli's daughter-in-law named her son "Ichabod" meaning "The glory of the Lord has departed".

Isaiah, predicting that even though Israel would be taken into captivity certainly some of the Lord's people would return to the land eventually and so he named one of his sons "Shear-Jashub" meaning a remnant will return.

But to emphasize that destruction would take place first, he was commanded to name yet another son Maher-Shalal-hazbaz meaning, the spoil speeds, the prey hastens.

Imagine going to kindergarten with that name tagged on you.

But in the same passage where Isaiah is told to give his kids those grotesque names he also predicts that another son would be born who would be called, "Wonderful Counselor", "Mighty God", "Everlasting Father" and "Prince of Peace".

And over Eight centuries later, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph, a carpenter in Nazareth, a rather obscure village near the sea of Galilee, and told him that his virgin fiancée, Mary was miraculously pregnant and she would bear a son and Joseph was to name the child JESUS.

And that name was carefully selected - a very definite name - a name to convey a message consistent with who this child was.

The name Jesus is taken from the Greek name Iesous which was a Hellenizing (or Greek form) of the Hebrew Yeshua (familiar to us as Joshua) which is a shortening of Ye-ho-shua which means "Yahweh is the one who saves".

In its simplest form the name means "God saves".

In that two-word meaning of the name Jesus lays the simple and yet profound summary of who this child is and what he will do.

In Matthew 1:21 (our text for today) the angel of the Lord goes on to say, "You are to give him the name of Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

Joseph, you are to name the child "God-saves" because truly it is he, this child, who will save his people from their sins.

When Joseph heard this, it must have caused him confusion. He as well as any Jew knew that only God can save.

Psalm 3:8 Salvation is the Lord's

Jonah 2:9 Deliverance belongs to the Lord

Psalm 130:8 God will redeem Israel from its iniquities.

And yet Joseph could not misunderstand the plain meaning of the words: "He, this child, will save his people from their sins."

Thus this child was somehow, God - God with us.

And in fact, the angel goes on in verses 22-23 to anticipate just what Joseph might have been thinking:

The prophet Isaiah, in the same passage to which I referred earlier, calls the son to be born not only Wonderful counselor, eternal father etc. but also calls him "Emanuel".

The angel reminds Joseph of that prophecy and repeats that this child, the one Mary was then carrying, would be called Emanuel which means "God with us."

In fact when Matthew records this account of the conversation between the angel and Joseph and he writes it in Greek this is the way he writes it:
Emanuel which means, "With us The God"

This rendering makes sharp as possible exactly what is being said and what is taking place:
This child is The God with us.

That's right, Joseph. This child that you should name Jesus which means "God saves" is none other than The God who is now with you.

or as Fredrich Bruner in his volume entitled The Christbook calls him, "The With-us God".

Somehow, God personally takes on human nature.
This baby to be a man (Jesus) is God.

In the Old Testament God is again and again presented not as the "with us" God but as the "above us" God.

The theological word for that is "Transcendence".
It means that God is truly above us, mightier, holier, different, He is wholly "other".

The emphasis is on how unlike us God is.

From time to time God would visit. In the Old Testament the expression is that "the Angel of the Lord" spoke or did something or other. But that only emphasized that "otherness" of God.

In Islam, Allah is always the "above us God".

Allah is too holy to come down.
He may send prophets or books or angels but He doesn't come.
For Allah to touch earth is called "shirk"
And anyone who claims that Allah/God has a son or became a human, or even touched earth is to blaspheme God

But in the New Testament that is precisely what we see happening:
The great "Above us God" became one of us.

God not only touched our earth, He became a human being.
God "be-littled" himself.
The story of Christmas is God's own self-shirking.

God is so great that he could come down.
He loved us so much that he was willing to come down.
And He loves us so dearly that He did come down.

The "Above us God" became "The with-us God"!!

Paul Harvey, the nationally syndicated radio commentator, loves to tell the parable of the birds.

John, in his Gospel, put it this way, "And the Word (Jesus) became flesh and lived among us..."

Many men and women down through the centuries have come to understand the principle of becoming one of the people you intend to help:
Francis of Assisi a first turned away in disgust from the Lepers that eventually he lived with in order to aid.

Mother Theresa understood that she had to live with the poorest of the poor in Calcutta - become one of the them in order to reach them and to help them.

More than one missionary has become a slave to reach slaves.

Yet none of their acts of self-denial can compare with that of the With us God who though he was rich for our sakes became poor. He took on our nature entered into our sin-polluted world, took our sin upon himself and died in our place.

At this time of year especially, don't lose sight of the fact that that "with-ness" means "with" you.

The Great "Above-you" God became the Great "With-you" God.

Now the name "Jesus" when coupled with the name "Emanuel" gives us an unmistakable definition of this child born of Mary:

He is "The With-us God who saves".

The second thing I wish to remind you of today is not only who the child is but what he will do.

Look with me again at vs 21 where the Angel says that Joseph should name the child "Jesus" because he will save his people from their sins.

It is very important to notice what Jesus will save people from:

"Their sins"

Moses had saved his people from the Egyptians - their enemy.

Even David had saved his people from their enemies - the Philistines.

Down through the centuries, the Jewish people had awaited a future messiah who would once again deliver them, save them from their enemies.

The Rabbis often repeated the phrase:

"As the first Deliverer (Moses) so shall the second be.

When Joseph heard the angel's words about the child saving the people from "their sins" - he must have at least wondered.

What kind of a Messiah would come and not deliver them from their enemies.

A Messiah who comes and doesn't liberate the people from their enemies, who doesn't come and drive the Romans out of the land is a piddly Messiah - hardly worthy of the title - Messiah.

But the central mission of Jesus was not to save people from other people's sins but to save them from their own sins.

Jesus didn't rivet the people's attention on the Romans or the collaborators and stir up a revolutionary fire to drive the usurping rulers out -

He concentrated his aim on his own people - their sins.

One of the most tempting thing for people of all ages is to blame their problems on their environment.

I act this way because... (And we list all kinds of reasons outside of ourselves that we claim make us behave the way we do.)

"My parents don't understand..."

"My spouse is unreasonable..."

"My boss is unjust..."

"My past warped me..."

"Oh, God, change my wife, my husband, my boss, my parents."

The hard part of the Gospel is that Jesus didn't come to first change our environment but to change us.

He didn't come to save us from our enemies but from ourselves.

He won't let me escape my sin,
my greed, my lust, my self-pity, my anger,
my revenge, my self-centeredness.

The great With-us God points a loving finger at us and says:
"Don't avoid the truth. In your heart you know that your actions are not ultimately the fault of someone else - they are your actions, your words, your thoughts.

You know that you are the culprit.

The Gospel has no effect in a person's life until they reach that point.

Until they recognize that it is them not someone else that needs to be saved.

And how does Jesus (the God-with-us-who-saves) actually save us?

In Acts chapter two, a passage of Scripture that we have been studying over the last several weeks, The Apostle Peter speaks of the two sides of salvation:

He speaks of forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

When Jesus died on that Roman cross, He did so intentionally as a sacrifice for our sins.

God had said that the person who sins must die.

Then God came and took those damning sins of ours on himself and died in our place.

Hinduism, has traditionally denied the possibility of forgiveness. Everything is ruled by Karma, the iron law of retribution.

By your actions you incur debt; you and you alone can pay those debts;

If you have not paid them off in this life, you must before a second time, a third time, as many times as it takes until you have finally balanced the accounts

The Hindu concept is: You sin, you pay.

The Christian Gospel is: You sin, God pays.

What Jesus does to save us is to offer us forgiveness for our sins based on what He has already done for us.

The Good News that Peter preached was that those who would turn from their sins and ask for the Forgiveness that Jesus alone can provide would truly be forgiven -
freed from the guilt of their sin -
saved from the penalty attached to their sin.

And Peter says also that when we so trust in Jesus,
He also gives us the gift of His Holy Spirit -

It is the Holy Spirit of God in us that enables
us to begin to break the power of sin in our lives.

It is by His presence and ability that we can
begin to say "no" to our sin and begin to say
"yes" to God.

The old patterns of life can change.
The old habits can be broken.
The old ways of relating to people can be altered.

The power of God in us saves us from ourselves.

Jesus-Emanuel, The With-us-God who saves us from our sins.

What a name, what a Savior!