

Presence, Not Proof

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“And they shall name him Emmanuel, which means ‘God is with us.’” – Matthew 1:23b

This past Thursday I spent a couple of hours with Ted Wetzel, a local author, about whose book you’re going to hear more about next year. Ted is coming to discuss his book with our Reading Group in July, and you’re all invited to read the book and engage Ted in conversation on that evening. Watch the bulletin announcements for that invitation.

The question at the heart of Ted’s book is this: Is America broken? That’s the animating idea behind the book and its working title. We hear so much these days about how polarized we are and how our political system is rigged and how our elections are tainted. Bad news is so pervasive and constant it would be easy to despair. It would be easy to give up and say the American experiment in democracy has failed. Maybe our republic is slipping away from us, as Ben Franklin supposedly warned, and maybe we will lose whatever self-determination we currently enjoy. Maybe future historians will look at this time in our history and conclude that God was not with us.

Maybe, but maybe not. I don’t think America is broken and I don’t believe that God, like Elvis, has left the building. I think America has problems and some of them are big and complex and not easily solved. What country doesn’t have problems like that? When you try to get 330 million people to live together, you’re bound to have problems. Planning a family vacation has problems.

But broken? I don’t think so. We’ve got impeachment proceedings underway in Washington, and I don’t think that means we’re broken. The architects of our system of government built into it a mechanism by which we as a nation can remove elected officials from office between elections if our representatives think that official’s behavior merits removal. We don’t take such removal lightly and we don’t make it easy, and that’s by design. Impeachment consumes resources we’d otherwise spend on other problems, but sometimes a leader’s behavior becomes one of those problems, and so we have impeachment. America’s not broken in that respect.

In fact, we’re in great shape compared to the state Judah was in when the Lord gave a sign to King Ahaz in the shape of a prophet’s baby. It was sometime between 736 and 732 BCE. The fragile kingdom of Israel that David and Solomon had barely managed to pull and hold together had broken into two kingdoms – Judah in the south and Ephraim in the north. Israel really was broken, and things were going to get worse before they got better.

The northern kingdom of Ephraim formed a military alliance with their closest neighbor, Aram, which we call Syria today. And those two kings tried to force King Ahaz of Judah to join them so that they could revolt against their overlord, the Assyrians. Ahaz refused, and so Syria

and Ephraim invaded Judah to try to take it over. The attackers laid siege to Jerusalem, Ahaz's capital, and according to the book of Chronicles, Judah lost 120,000 soldiers in a single day. Jerusalem survived the siege, but Judah was losing the war. Ahaz was desperate and summoned all his advisors to help him discover a way out of a dire situation. One of those advisors was his court prophet, Isaiah, whose wife was expecting a baby. She's the young woman referred to in the famous prophecy that the writer of Matthew's gospel would apply to Jesus many centuries later: "Look the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel" (Isa. 7:14).

Immanuel was one of Isaiah's three children, all of whom were given symbolic names to reassure a frightened king. Before Immanuel could become a teenager – "before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good" – the prophet went on, the coalition of Syria and Ephraim would be destroyed and their land would be deserted, and Judah would be delivered from that threat.

And, indeed, that's what happened. In 722, Assyria invaded Syria and Ephraim and destroyed them both. Immanuel, the child whose birth was a prophetic sign, was probably ten or twelve years old.

It would be great to say at this point that King Ahaz and the prophet Isaiah and his unnamed wife and their children and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah lived happily ever after, but that's not what happened. God was indeed with the chosen people of Judah, who believed that God had delivered them from the hands of their enemies to the north, but other enemies remained. Assyria turned Judah into a vassal state, demanding an annual tribute that was so heavy Ahaz had to raid the temple treasury to pay it. And if living under those burdensome and shameful conditions weren't bad enough, Assyria itself would be conquered by its southern neighbor, the Babylonians, who would gobble up Judah about 135 years after Isaiah's prophecy of deliverance. "Meet the new boss," The Who sang in 1971, "Same as the old boss." Some things, it seems, never change.

Or do they? Every now and then perhaps God does break through the tough skin of self-interest that keeps us imprisoned in ourselves and in our groups. Can anyone seriously say that the world didn't change with the birth of the baby in Bethlehem? The entire western half of the globe divides history into before and after that birth. Before that baby's birth, there was no such thing as a church; today, about 2.4 billion of us belong to churches with some degree of commitment. Hospitals, orphanages, hospices, public education – followers of the baby of Bethlehem created all of those. Can anyone seriously doubt that God is with us?

The other day I got in the mail word about a lecture held in Harvard's Memorial Church that was moderated by the director of Harvard's Prison Studies Program. We're studying our prisons because we know that they're not what they should be. Racial minorities and poor people are disproportionately represented in our prison population, and many of us are working to fix that, to make it better, and to make it just and fair. I know that some of you in this congregation are engaged in that work. Can we doubt that God is with us?

Wherever people are struggling to feed the hungry, house the homeless, repair God's creation, correct old and lasting wrongs, bring justice to the exploited and victimized, give voice to the ignored and silenced, stop cruelty and barbarism – in short, wherever people are confronting sin, we see Immanuel in the flesh, God with us.

Some people need miracles to believe in God; I don't. I don't need to stand open-mouthed and stupefied at some unexpected and inexplicable occurrence to know that God is with us. I just need to look around and pay attention. I see God's faithfulness everywhere, even when things are going to pieces. In fact, that's when God's presence is often most evident to me. In every bad situation, even the most horrible, God will show up. I told you last week about Father Maximilian Kolbe, who took the place of a condemned man in a Nazi death camp. But people stand up everywhere and all the time to embody God's love. Some people will say that those folks are simply manifesting their altruism gene and that their actions are no proof of God's existence or God's presence with us. There's no way to sort out the presence of an altruistic gene or the presence of the divine, and I couldn't care less which it is. I don't need proof of God's existence; what I need is the presence of a love that will not let me go. What I need to navigate life's shoals and storms is the presence of a kindness that does not depend on me. What I need to know is that Christmas is, in some mysterious way, true because of those dear hearts and gentle people – as well as those warriors for justice and the enigmatic mystics – who labor to make the world safe for children, for old people, and for tadpoles.

The promise of God to make things right is an eschatological promise, that is, a promise that applies beyond history. God has not promised to make things right in history; that's our job. That's our unfinished task, our work in progress, our going concern. Christians are always going to have work to do, and the worse things get, the more our services will be needed.

So, as the angel said to Jesus's earthly father, "Do not be afraid." Do not be afraid to do the awkward and socially disapproved of thing if it manifests care and mercy. Do not be afraid to be different in an indifferent and self-absorbed world. Do not be afraid to be gentle with the mob howls for violence. Do not be afraid. Immanuel. God is with us.