

Sermon: Immanuel in Brokenness

(Preached by Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Dec. 18, 2022)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Christmas family portrait, you know what I am talking about, a practice that is increasingly becoming popular, of sending portrait of one's family to others, of friends and relatives, during the season of Christmas. These family portraits usually take on a similar pattern, of smiling faces, of the whole family dressed in their Sunday's best, standing beside a fireplace, or around a Christmas tree. It is a nice gesture of sending warm greetings, not just from oneself, but from one's whole family. It is a nice way to touch base, a way of noting 'look at how fast the kids are growing', a visual and concrete way of saying 'we wish you a merry Christmas, and a happy New Year'.

I know a few of my colleagues, other pastors, are doing it. I have yet to send one. I don't know if I try to gather my boys to do a Christmas family portrait, whether they would comply or not. Truth be told, my cynical self would, probably, be the first one to object. Those family portraits I have received, thus far, look just too unreal. I supposed portraits in general do have an unreal quality to them. They are supposed to be majestic, heroic, leaving a lasting image of oneself, at the peak of life.

I wonder then, if Joseph and Mary were to send their family portrait to us all, what would that look like? Would it capture the peak of their family life, of the baby Jesus born in a manger, surrounded by adoring parents, visited by shepherds and wise men from the east? That particular scene, what we have come to know as the Nativity scene, is familiar to many. But if we pause and really think about it, are we able to grasp how strange, how unlikely, how miraculous that whole scene is?

Come to think of it, that marriage, the union between Joseph and Mary, was as strange and as unlikely as it comes. Our Gospel reading this morning, in Matthew 1, captures some of that strangeness. It starts with a startling reality, Mary was engaged to Joseph, but before they were to live together, she was found to be pregnant! Shocking! Scandalous!

We the readers know the truth, that Mary's pregnancy was the work of the Holy Spirit, of immaculate conception. It was announced to her by

Angel Gabriel, and it was accepted by Mary in the most humble way. But Joseph had no way of knowing that. To him, a simple carpenter in training, Mary's pregnancy was simply infidelity, an egregious betrayal. It was a love now tattered, a dream now shattered, a family he had hoped for would now not be.

But Joseph was a righteous man. More than righteous, he was a kind man. He was unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace, to outright humiliation that may even put her life at risk. So Joseph planned to divorce her quietly. I don't know what it means to divorce someone quietly, in a village setting no less, but his heart was in the right place.

So just as he agonized over this decision and had resolved to do it, an angel of the Lord came 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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*" (Mat. 1:20-21) The Gospel writer added, for our benefit, that all this was taking place so that words spoken by the Lord through the prophet would be fulfilled. "*Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,*" which means, "*God is with us.*" (v.23) When Joseph awoke, shocked by that strange revelation, he nevertheless did as the angel of the Lord commanded, and took Mary as his wife.

Jim Larson, a liturgical artist at the House of Mercy in St. Paul, Minnesota tried to capture that strangeness, that brokenness. In his oil painting on canvas, titled "Joseph and Mary: Wedding Portrait", as shown on the bulletin cover, we see a pregnant Mary seemingly at ease, surrounded symbolically by a raven, a goldfinch, a skull, a dove and a dragon. What's printed on the bulletin maybe a bit grainy, with details hard to decipher, but we could still make out the expression on Joseph's face. He has a look of a man that is saying inwardly, "What have I gotten myself into?" This is what Larson had to say about his work, "the narrative might remain hard to comprehend, but that's OK; the stories they grow out of are pretty strange to begin with."

We worship a mysterious God who works out our salvation through strange brokenness. If we were to take the conception and birth of Jesus as the sign of 'Emmanuel,' of God is with us, have you ever wonder why, why would God incarnate the God-self through that lowly couple of Mary and Joseph? Aren't there other descendants of David, who might be a bit more, 'kingly'?

Come to think of it, the sign of Emmanuel itself came out of a strange and broken context. Isaiah was prophet in the court of King Ahaz of Judah, around 734 BCE. The Southern Kingdom of Judah was being invaded by the coalition of Pekah, king of Israel, and Rezin, king of Aram. Judah's northern neighbours had wanted Ahaz to join them in their fight against the threat of the Assyrian Empire.

Isaiah counselled Ahaz to trust in the Lord instead of untrustworthy allies, and told him to ask God for a sign, in order to confirm the words of the prophet. Ahaz refused, offering a lame excuse that, "*I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.*" (Isaiah 7:11). What Ahaz didn't say then, what he probably wouldn't admit even if pushed, was that he did not trust in the Lord God. He had no confidence that God will rescue him, to ward off the armies of both Israel and Aram.

Nevertheless, Isaiah offered him a sign, that "*the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel*" (v.14). Ahaz would not live to see the sign, he never got to experience Immanuel, God with us. What he did was to invite the Assyrian Empire to come to his aid. A total miscalculation. Yes, Judah's northern neighbours were later destroyed, but in the process Judah under Ahaz was also subdued by the Assyrian invader, thus becoming a vassal state. The sign of Immanuel would come, eventually, 734 years later, thus fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy "*for before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.*" (v.16).

The point of this strange story that I wish to highlight, is that despite much faithlessness of Ahaz, God still offered the sign of Immanuel to us, that is God with us. In the Scripture, we hear complaints from the people about God, that the way of the Lord is unjust. To me, I never question the justness of the way of the Lord, I simply think the way of the Lord is strange. We worship a mysterious God who works out our salvation through strange brokenness. God continues to call broken people, to use imperfect servants to accomplish the perfect will of God.

Perhaps Mary and Joseph needed to know the brokenness of their lives in order to love one another. Perhaps we are the same. We also need to experience brokenness in our lives, in order for us to trust God, to rely only on God, and to love the Lord God. So on this 4th Sunday of Advent, the Advent of Love. We are reminded of the way the Triune God broke the God-self. God did so by sending to us God's only begotten Son Jesus.

From this singular act of self-giving, or kenosis in Greek, we come to know what Agape love is, the self-sacrificing love of God.

Let me leave you with this story: A water bearer had two large pots, each on one end of a pole which he carried across his neck. One of the pots was perfect, always delivered a full portion of water at the end of the long walk from the stream to the house. The other pot had a small crack, was only able to deliver half portion of water.

For months this went on. Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments, perfect to the purpose for which it was made. But the cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of the job. After some time of what it perceived to be a bitter failure, the cracked pot spoke to the water bearer one day by the stream. "I am ashamed of myself, and I have failed you." "Why?" asked the bearer. "What are you ashamed of?"

"I have been able, to deliver only half my load, because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all throughout the trail. Because of my flaws, you are only able to get half value for all your work," the pot said.

The man looked kindly at the cracked pot and said, "My dear old pot, you haven't failed me. While we walk back to the house today, I want you to look at all of the beautiful flowers along the path."

And sure enough, as they walked home the pot opened its eyes and noticed for the first time the beautiful array of flowers that decorated the journey home. When they reached the house, the man said to the pot, "Did you notice that the flowers were growing only on one side of the path? They grow only on the side where I carry you, but not on the other pot's side.

You see, I knew about your crack, and so I planted flowers all along your side of the path. While we are walking back from the stream, you aren't losing water—you are making the flowers grow! Isn't that also the way of the Lord?

In the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. Amen.