

Mathew 1:18-25

“Emmanuel: When Home Is Hard”

December 4, 2001      Maple Grove UMC

*Home for Christmas* . . . On Christmas cards and TV specials *Home for Christmas* conjures up images of smiling children, perfect parents, and presents under the tree. But I suppose we’re all at least aware, and some of us know all too well, that not every home is like that at Christmas. Some kids get beat on at home, some parents don’t have enough food to put on the table, some dinner tables will be full of food but have an empty place this year, some families have terrible secrets. The term we use for this nowadays is a “dysfunctional family,” and while all families are dysfunctional to some extent, some really are.

The Bible is full of them. Abraham slept with his wife’s servant in order to have a child, and then kicked both mother and child out of the house when his wife didn’t like it. Isaac and Rebecca had twins who fought even before they were born—Isaac loved Esau and Rebecca loved Jacob and, well, you can already tell there’s going to be trouble. Besides the thing with Bathsheba, King David never could discipline his sons, not even when they took up weapons against him. Yes, the Bible is full of troubled families.

And then there's Jesus' family. Jesus' mother found herself pregnant before the wedding, which in those days was a big deal. It simply wasn't done. And his dad, well, he was a righteous man and all, but he, well, he heard angels talk to him. After Jesus was born, the whole family became refugees, fleeing the Holy Land for Egypt. And even when they came back, they were still so scared they had to live in the new town of Nazareth. I mean, none of it was their fault or anything, but theirs was one stressful home that first Christmas, and for several Christmases to come.

But here's the thing: about a family with all that stress and trouble, about a home that definitely wouldn't have made it onto a Christmas card or TV special, came this word about their son:

Look, the virgin shall conceive and  
 bear a son,  
 and they shall name him  
 Emmanuel

which in Hebrew, Matthew is quick to point out, "God is with us."

Here, I think, is the message: When home is hard, Emmanuel, God is with us.

- When the baby's born too soon, or when daddy's not around:  
 Emmanuel, God is with us.
- When there's not enough money for presents, or maybe even for rent, somehow still: Emmanuel, God is with us.

- When home is not pleasant or sometimes not even safe, hang on to this: Emmanuel, God is with us.
- When home is hard: Emmanuel, God is with us.

Years ago writer Harriett Richie told about the time her husband decided he was hungry for breakfast about 1:00 am after the midnight Christmas Eve service.<sup>1</sup> The only place they could find open at that hour was a greasy spoon truck stop, filled not with carols but with twangy country music. The only customers were a one-armed man at the counter and some men drinking coffee and smoking at a table in the corner. A tired woman named Rita took their order, looking like any waitress would who draws the late shift on Christmas Eve.

About that time an old van pulled up and in came a young man in tattered jeans and a young woman holding a baby. As Rita took their order the baby started to cry. The father lifted the baby and made funny faces, but it didn't help. The mother picked up the diaper bag and started to go out with the child.

But Rita reached out, "Drink your coffee, hon," she told her. Let's see what I can do." Rita took the baby and began bouncing her until she stopped crying. She brought the baby over to the table of Harriett and her

husband. “Just look at this little darlin’,” she said. “Mine are so big and grown now.”

The one-armed man picked up a pot of coffee and started waiting on tables. As he filled their mugs, Harriett felt tears in her eyes. “What’s wrong?” her husband asked. “Nothing,” she told him. “Just Christmas.”

She wiped her eyes and said, “He’d come here, wouldn’t he?”

“Who would?”

“Jesus,” she said. “If Jesus were born in this town tonight and the choices were our neighborhood, the church, or this truck stop, it would be here, wouldn’t it? This is where he’s needed.”

“Here or at a homeless shelter,” he said.

The houses in their neighborhood were dark as they drove home. As they passed the Milfords, she wondered what Christmas would be like for them. Their daughter died in a car accident during the summer. Next door Jack McCarthy had lost his job and his house was in foreclosure. A little farther down the street lived the Baileys, whose marriage was hanging by a thread. And Mrs. Smith’s son had died from AIDS. “Maybe we need him here just as much, after all,” she thought.

And I look around me here this morning, and it's not a truck stop or homeless shelter. But I do see families with folks who've lost jobs, families whose children in trouble. I see families whose hearts are filled with sorrow, families struggling with addiction. And I remember Harriett's words: "He'd come here."

"Who would?" we ask.

"Jesus." Emmanuel, God is with us.

And I look at my own family which, I don't know if you want to call it dysfunctional or not, but we've got stresses and troubles of our own. I've got a brother with Down Syndrome and a nephew with autism, so that neither one will probably ever live quite on their own. I've got a relative recovering from a meth habit and another with partial PTSD who nevertheless will be deployed to Afghanistan next year, for the third time. And I remember Harriett's words: "He'd come here."

In the places where we are broken, Harriett concludes, in the dark holes where something is missing, in the silence of unanswered prayer, the wondrous gift is given. Or as Matthew said about Jesus, when home is hard: Emmanuel, God is with us.

On Friday I took Communion to Adele Eierman, a 90 year-old saint of Maple Grove Church. She's struggling with terrible back pain. She lives alone, and home is hard for her this year. She told me this story and gave me permission to share it with you. She said that a few years ago she flew to Texas to visit her daughter. One of the flight attendants, surprised to see such an elderly lady making her own way, asked Adele, "Are you traveling alone?" Without missing a beat, Adele replied, "No, God is with me." That's what I mean by Emmanuel, God is with us.

Maybe you need this message for your own home. Maybe you know another family that desperately needs to hear that message, and you can be the one to tell them. Either way, will you take this message home with you today? Whatever your home is like, he'd come there. When home is hard, Emmanuel, God is with us.

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<sup>1</sup> Harriett Richie, "He'd Come Here," *The Christian Century*, December 13, 1995.