

God with Us
Matthew 1:18-23
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Sometimes, the closer you are to something, the harder it is to see it.

We think that if we'd lived when Jesus lived, it would have been easier to respond and become one of his followers.

If we saw his miracles, we'd believe, but the Pharisees began to plot to have him killed after he raised Lazarus from the dead, his greatest miracle. That raises the possibility and the likelihood that the opposite is true.

Those who were closer to the event of Jesus being born had more challenges of accepting him as one who came from God, who existed before time, who held the keys to eternal life, than we do 2000 years later.

What was Joseph to think when Mary came back from a visit with her cousin Elizabeth? By then, it was obvious that she was with child.

What were her friends to think?

Mary must have known that no one was going to believe that the child within her was the creation of the Holy Spirit of God. After the visit from the angel and the physical changes to her body, she knew it was true herself.

Which one of you young ladies would have wanted to have been in Mary's shoes?

Even though they were not yet married, Joseph's pledge to her was as binding as marriage. He could have had her stoned to death, but we are told that Joseph had decided against any public accusations. He had decided on a quiet divorce.

It took a visit from an angel in a dream to convince Joseph that what Mary had said was true. Following the visit from the angel, Joseph took Mary as his wife.

From that point on, the focus of the biblical story moves away from Mary's social problems.

Now the focus is on Jesus and his relationship with others.

We discover that Mary wasn't the only person having trouble convincing people that her son was from God. Even with the miracles he performed, Jesus had trouble convincing people that he was from God.

People asked questions like “Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Isn’t this the son of Joseph, the carpenter?”

They were too close to see who he really was.

It’s easy to understand how people would be skeptical that an individual who looked like any other man, who grew up among them, could be more than a man, or could have come from anywhere other than the womb of his mother.

Part of the authenticity of the biblical story is the honesty of it. The Bible acknowledges there were skeptics from the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. There are skeptics now. You may be among them.

While there were thousands who came to believe Jesus was could be the Messiah, most abandoned him by the time he was nailed to the cross.

Again, this is the honesty of the scriptures.

We never come to Jesus because someone has proven the incarnation to us. We never come to Jesus because all doubts have been erased by scripture.

We come to Jesus on faith.

Like the Apostle Paul who met Jesus on the Road to Damascus, those of us who believe have had our own encounter with the risen Lord.

The celebration of Christmas is the celebration by Christians of acknowledging that in the baby Jesus, the presence of God came to us in the vulnerable package of a newborn. In Jesus, divinity and humanity came together. There is nothing special about the Christmas story if this is not the message.

Otherwise, Mary and Joseph are not special at all. The wise men were a bunch of traveling fools and the shepherds gave up a good night’s work to see an ordinary baby born in a rather strange place.

It is Matthew who reminds his readers that Jesus was Immanuel, which means “God with us.” This is one of the most important theological statements about Jesus anyone can make. Jesus is “God with us.”

Matthew was writing to a people who believed that God had been with his people throughout time.

God was with Noah and his family as they were spared from the Great Flood.

God was with Abraham when he led him to a new land.

God was with Moses as he led the Hebrews from slavery. He led them with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

God was with Joshua as they claimed the Promised Land.

God was with Daniel in the lion's den.

God was with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace.

God was with Jonah in the belly of the great fish.

God was with Elijah when the famine came and the brook went dry.

God was with Israel in the Exile.

God was with Nehemiah when the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt.

The people knew the stories but many had never felt that kind of godly presence these stories spoke about. They longed for that kind of presence.

Even though many worshiped at the temple, the presence of God was elusive. The good news was that no longer did God's presence have to be elusive because in Jesus, God was literally with the people.

In the fullness of time, God chose to leave heaven and enter our world to show us the way to live.

Even after Jesus ascended into heaven, his presence did not have to be elusive. He breathed his Holy Spirit into his disciples. That Holy Spirit is received by all who place their faith in Jesus.

Matthew told his story to a people who had Messianic expectations. They knew that the prophets had promised God would send them a promised leader.

Through his gospel, Matthew sought to build upon their belief that God had been with them in times past and had promised through the prophets to send one who would represent God. Yet Matthew knew what had happened would stretch the faith of his readers.

To believe that God came in the flesh was a concept too big to comprehend. It's a concept too big and wonderful for us even now, but so is the creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2.

How does God speak and create the world into being? How is it that God can be present before the creation of time, and space, and matter?

It requires faith in a God who transcends our world and who permeates every aspect of it.

Can you dare believe in such a God?

Why would God even want to enter our world in such a way, knowing that to submit himself to this world would mean that He would come face to face with suffering and pain?

Maybe Bill Lishman from Scugog, Ontario can help us understand that a bit better.

To get to Bill's 100 acre-farm, you need to travel northeast from Toronto about 50 miles through a landscape of apple orchards, cow pastures and an occasional ostrich farm. As the goose flies, that trip would be many miles less and Bill knows a few things about how geese fly. (<http://people.com/archive/leader-of-the-flock-vol-46-no-16/>)

For one, and I bet you know this, geese fly south for the winter, but you might not know that if a goose is orphaned or has never made a migratory trip, it will stay where it is and suffer through the cold harsh winter of the north. After several years, a flock of geese will exist in a northern location and never know that a southern place of warmer, lush climate exists. They could take wing and fly there, but they have no clue that such a place even exists. (Ibid)

Bill Lishman dreamed of being a pilot but he is partially color-blind and was barred from getting his license, so one day he began tinkering with an ultralight aircraft. At that time, most of those flew no higher than 1,000 feet and did not exceed 63 mph. (Ibid)

One day in 1984, Bill was enjoying a beautiful calm flight when a flock of ducks joined him in flight. That just have been a shocking surprise. Those ducks gave Bill a crazy, yet ingenious idea. (<http://williamlishman.com/with-the-birds/>)

What if he could use his ultralight plane to teach orphaned geese to fly south for the winter? If they could make the trip once, they would know the way and would likely return to his farm and surrounding areas for the summer. (Ibid)

Now that is a crazy idea, because you'd have to be a goose, or a Dr. Doolittle, or something like that to communicate with geese to convince them to follow an ultralight aircraft.

As it turns out, goslings attach to the first thing they see when they are born. If they have no parent, they will follow almost anything that moves. (Ibid)

Bill used this to his advantage. He took a new hatching of goslings and got them used to the loud noise of the Easy Riser ultralight aircraft. As they got older, he began to get them to follow the Easy Riser ultralight which they identified as their surrogate parent. (Ibid).

The birds got used to following the Easy Riser up and down the grass airstrip. The next step was to get them used to flying short hops, then longer and longer hops. As the birds got older some began flying some circuits above the runway, but no one knew if they would follow the ultralight into the air. (Ibid)

It was a magical July day when the final test came. The Easy Riser took off into the sky and the gosling followed, but they were far behind. Bill had to throttle back and fly at the verge of stall, as the young birds strained to keep up. But it was a success! He had proven that they would follow him. (Ibid)

In 1993, Bill Lishman led the first aircraft-led migration of birds.
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_Lishman)

Since then, hundreds of birds have been successfully taught new migratory patterns using this technique, including the Sandhill crane, Whooping crane, and the Trumpeter swan.
(http://lubbockonline.com/stories/011401/ope_011401087.shtml#.WjwNK62ZODU)

We are not unlike those goslings. Many people do not know that a loving God exists. People are living lives far away from God and they have no idea what a life of faith looks like. No one has ever shown them.

We come into this world impressionable. We attach ourselves to what we know and to what we see.

People attach themselves to all kinds of religions, to all kinds of philosophies, to all kinds of beliefs about God, to all kinds of lifestyles.

The Bible teaches us that as a human race, we have all attached ourselves to a life of sin which separate us from God. "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."Romans 6:23 (NIV)

That gift came in a most unusual way. God decided to that maybe we would follow him if He became one of us. Fully God, fully man, Jesus entered this world to lead us through it and eventually from this world into the next.

Miniature transmitters recently revealed that the 4-ounce Arctic tern travels about 4,000 miles per year as it migrates between Greenland and Antarctica. That's the greatest migration journey of any animal on earth.
(<https://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2010/01/100111-worlds-longest-migration-arctic-tern-bird/>)

But that's not the greatest migration.

The greatest migration is made from this world into the next, from earth to heaven. Jesus told his disciples that he was going there to prepare a place for them. He said, "You know the way to the place where I am going." (John 14:4)

Thomas said, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" (v.5)

Jesus answered, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know the Father as well." (v.6)

Jesus came so we could know God. If you know Jesus, then you know God. In order to know Jesus, you must have faith.

Jesus is the greatest gift. If you have not received him by faith, that is the only way you can receive him. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.” Ephesians 2:8-9
This Christmas, come to God through faith in Jesus Christ, and God will always be with you.

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