

The Emmanuel Son
Matthew 1.18-25
Advent 4A
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Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

If you are fortunate enough to have a 4th or 5th grade student in your life who has already moved through the *Harry Potter* series, chances are you are familiar with Percy Jackson and Jason Grace, the demigod children of Poseidon and Jupiter, respectively. My son invited me to read the first series along with him, and I'm now about 50 pages away from the end of the second series. That's a full 10 novels of gods, demigods, heroes, and monsters with quests from Olympus to Hades to Tartarus, and Long Island, NY, to Athens, Greece, and back.

While the first series focuses only on the demigod children of the Greek gods living together at a rustic training camp in New York, the second explores the Roman side of the gods and introduces a second set of demigod children at the more orderly and regimented Roman camp in California. Seven children of Aphrodite, Athena, Zeus/Jupiter, Poseidon, Hephaestus, Hades and Mars/Ares, a combination of Roman and Greek, must work together to save both Olympus and the world from the rise of Gaea and the giants. In working together as a Greek and Roman team, they also effectively reconcile the gods Greek and Roman natures to themselves, thus restoring the gods to full power.

My son and I have easily read over 4000 pages of these stories based in the actual myths of ancient mythology, and we have been captivated by the worlds first imagined some 3000 years ago. Powerful, temperamental gods who can take human form, sneaking to earth to sire half-god, half-human children. The legends of Medusa and her head of snakes, Atlas and his eternal struggle to hold the sky on his back, sirens and cyclopes, muses, fates, and Pegasus. The power struggles of earth, water, sky, and underworld. The tales are rich and fascinating, and here we are still telling (and naming streets and krewes after them!) century after century.

Now imagine a world in which these stories were more than fascination but still permeated the consciousness of a culture—a complex, multi-tiered world of hidden, distant gods and their random and whimsical interaction with the human world. Consider the human hope of earning the gods' favor or avoiding their wrath by offering sacrifices and giving them honor. Surely, several centuries of that thinking influences every world view and shapes humanity's concept of divinity. To push back against that

concept of the gods would be not just countercultural but even radically dangerous. To play within that narrative and come to a different conclusion of Divinity would shape a different way of being in the world. To question not just the story of the gods but of the Divinity of Caesar, well that would be revolutionary.

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way, Matthew begins. Joseph was a man who believed there was only one God, Yahweh. And this one God was intimately connected with humanity. This one God created human beings to reflect God's nature, so each man and woman and boy and girl was just a little bit like God from the very beginning of all things. By breath and words and dirt, God created them to live as very good partners and co-creators of a good world. Joseph was a simple man, a righteous man, a man of faith. He was betrothed to Mary—legally promised to her by their fathers some time ago but not yet married. And he learns one day that she has not honored her part of the contract because she has become pregnant before they have officially married and lived together.

Joseph is a man in a world made for men, and that means he has options in how he wishes to deal with a betrothed woman who turns up pregnant by some unknown father, thus dishonoring the contract binding the two of them together. He can go through with the marriage and raise the child as his own; an unthinkable possibility. Or he can have her stoned. All he has to do is reveal her situation to others, and people will gladly line up to take care of her for him. But that's not who Joseph is, and he wants to accept a third option by dismissing her quietly. They will dissolve the contract, presumably bringing shame and embarrassment to their fathers, and potentially leaving Mary to care for her child alone in a world in which almost all women relied on the protection of men for their daily survival. He's a man with options, but the options aren't great.

Matthew's gospel tells us nothing of how Joseph found out this baby or what Mary's reaction was when Joseph exploded or cried or walked away in stunned silence. Luke's gospel tells us of Mary willingly giving herself to God's plan and then celebrating the growing child by singing, "My soul magnifies the Lord," with her cousin Elizabeth. She proclaims the justice that will surely come at last to the world through God's great plan. She celebrates as though God's good work is already finished. But in Matthew's telling, there is shock, fear, and panic. Joseph doesn't appear to be delighting in the mighty powers of God or celebrating the wonders of God's mysterious ways. No, instead we are looking at an hurt and angry man who has every reason to believe he has been cheated and deceived. Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. Matthew's birth narrative tells us Jesus is born into distress—not just the moral and spiritual distress of the world—but absolute crisis even at the family of origin level.

“We’re not used to this,” writes David Lose. “We’re accustomed to thinking about the beauty and wonder of the birth of Jesus, and that’s appropriate. But let’s not forget the distress, sense of betrayal, disappointment, and a host of other emotions that Joseph must have experienced, or the fear and hurt that Mary would likely have also felt as they sorted out their divinely complex relationship.”¹

When stoning is off the table but subjecting Mary and her son to a life of suffering and poverty seems the best and only option, “it takes a visit from an angel to calm all this down and orient Joseph to God’s intentions.”² The angels intervene. Like most of us today, Joseph wants out when the conflict is too hot and the way forward seems impossible, but the angels stop him to redirect him on the chosen path. When every option is unpalatable and cutting his losses and running away is the easiest and best of the worst, the angels of God conspire for good. Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way.

And when the angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream, there is a story to tell. The one God Joseph knows and worships is behind this Divine, unexpected pregnancy. There is a plan at work here, and Joseph is invited to play a significant role by lending his genealogy to the story. By welcoming God into the family, Joseph, of the line of David, will be the father of this Holy Spirit, Emmanuel son. Don’t be afraid, you see, the child will be named Jesus which means “he saves.” And this saving son will be the one the prophets spoke of. He’ll also be called Emmanuel which means “God is with us.”

In a world that has progressed from Zeus to Jupiter to Caesar, the God-King, another story emerges of Yahweh, Emmanuel, Jesus. God is with us. God is not far off in the clouds on a mountain. God is present in simplicity, in poverty, among the least of these. God is not a powerful and oppressive ruler of a grand empire. God is not capricious and distant. God is not born to royalty or earthly rulers. God is near as breath, taking human form and starting as a life in the womb to be cared for and raised in a home and in a faith. God sends word: DO NOT BE AFRAID. God is not just present but mysteriously at work in crisis and distress. God’s Spirit is moving and stirring in dramatic, unexpected ways to reach the very people created in his own image and guiding them fuller into that image by living a life as one of them—as one of us. “This is a narrative of surprising and unexpected events,” writes Ben Witherington, “and

¹ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2961>

² <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/12/advent-4-a-god-really-with-us/>

suggests a God of unexpected actions.”³ Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way.

Joseph woke up, let the dream work its way through his bones, and he said “yes” to the angel’s invitation to release fear and walk into a wilder story than even the wildest ones told by the culture around him. He said “yes” to releasing control and the expected order of things and accept the winding path of God. And it turns out, the same invitation is issued over and again by the life and ministry of Jesus, Emmanuel. As Arlen Hultgren notes, “Jesus gathered about himself a community of witness in his earthly ministry, and he continues to do so in the era after his resurrection and Pentecost. The people around Jesus, both ancient and modern, are to be a sign in the world that ‘God is with us,’ Emmanuel!”⁴

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way and continues in us even now. The birth of Jesus the Messiah, Emmanuel, God with us, continues in you as you sit in this room inhaling and exhaling. Your life is a sign. No matter what is before you: do not be afraid. Do not let the crisis and distress of life be your life’s guiding story. Do not look at the options the world presents to you as the only path for your life. Do not give up and walk away when the life before you seems too much. You are not alone, God is with you. Do not fear. God is with us. In the life of the one who saves, we recognize we have never been alone. In the community of saints, we awaken to the stirrings of the holy, ever guiding us to something radical and new and unforeseen. The Advent call today is to awaken to the love of God like Joseph awoke from his angel dream. Awaken to your life. Awaken to the work of God beside, before, and within you. Awaken to the presence of God with us, Emmanuel. May this birth continue to take place in us even now. Amen.

³ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=779

⁴ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1936