

God With Us

Matthew 1:18-25

¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

In Matthew 12:18ff we read a word from God through the prophet Isaiah in which God describes the nature, the *character*, of this one who was to be named Jesus, the one (as the angel said to Joseph) who “will save his people from their sins”:

¹⁸ “Here is my servant whom I have chosen,
the one I love, in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will proclaim justice to the nations.

¹⁹ He will not quarrel or cry out;
no one will hear his voice in the streets.

²⁰ A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out,
till he leads justice to victory.

²¹ In his name the nations will put their hope.

We find here a concise “picture” of, first of all, the *mission* of the Messiah. He is coming “to proclaim justice to the nations”, and to be the Agent of the “*triumph* of justice”. This word, ‘justice’ is a fascinating word in Scripture, and these verses are worth a sermon in themselves. (But, one at a time!)

In a nutshell, justice and ‘righteousness’ in the New Testament are basically the same thing. Justice is ‘right relations’ between humans, but also with God. And Jesus, the ‘Savior’, came for that purpose. To teach us how to live with each other, but also to be the means through which God would ‘fix’ the brokenness of humanity; the brokenness that separates us one from another, and

God With Us

also separates us from God. That is clearly the task of the Messiah – something here spelled out, let's not forget, by the prophet Isaiah who lived 700 years before the birth of Jesus.

That's good stuff...and someday we'll talk about that more. But what I want to focus on this morning in this passage is the description of the *character* of the Messiah. Not so much "what will he be doing", but moreso "how will he do it?" Because the 'how' is, actually, going to explain more clearly to us the 'what' of the Messiah's work. And that may not make any sense to you right now... but Lord willing, it will mean something to you in about 15 minutes!

OK, then, as we get more into the 'meat' of this morning, lets notice, the 'how' of the Messiah's work. Let's look again at verses 19 - 21

- ¹⁹ He will not quarrel or cry out;
no one will hear his voice in the streets.
²⁰ A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out,
till he leads justice to victory.
²¹ In his name the nations will put their hope.

Again..

- ²⁰ A bruised reed he *will not break*,
and a smoldering wick *he will not snuff out*...

Last week we talked about preparing to meet our God by "Getting a Bigger Picture of Jesus". We saw how John the Baptist got confused as to whether Jesus was really the Messiah that he (John) was announcing. The reason for his confusion was that Jesus was not fitting into the 'box' of popularly accepted ideas about the Messiah. He wasn't acting like the Messiah that everyone expected. Now, this confusion never resolved – and ultimately it lead to the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, which ironically, became the means by which God established "Justice" through the Messiah, just as Isaiah predicted.

But again, here, we see another disparity between Jesus and the preconceived pictures of him... everyone expected the Messiah to be a *conqueror*. They expected – and wanted – a political leader, a ruler, a *warrior* who would lead them to escape their *present* circumstances, and establish

God With Us

a new line of rulers who would bring peace on earth. (Or, at least in Israel. And at least for awhile.) Now, this might seem kind of short sighted to us, for the work of a Messiah, but don't forget, we've had 2,000 years of seeing this 'from the other side'.

And, the truth is, there are still people who picture religion – including Christianity – as the means to the end of all suffering, to present day political injustice (as we define that), etc. But, again, we get a clearer picture of what *Jesus* came to do when we look at how he went about doing it. And that's where these lines give us pause:

²⁰ A bruised reed he *will not break*,
and a smoldering wick *he will not snuff out*...

What kind of person do you picture when you hear those words? Well, clearly, they are words describing a *gentle* man, aren't they? They are words describing not just a *kind* man, but one who is 'carefully' kind – i.e., someone who goes out of their way to 'share their kindness'. Or, we could sum all that up by saying that these words are describing a deep, profound '*compassion*'.

I heard a powerful message from Brennan Manning recently on a CD (whom I've quoted many times here before). In this message he tells the story of old Hassidic rabbi, Levi Yecheff, from the Ukraine, who claimed he learned the meaning of love from a drunken peasant.

One morning the rabbi was walking in the Polish countryside visiting a friend of his who owned a tavern. When the rabbi walked in, he came across two men, seated at a table, both (in Manning's words) 'drunk as skunks' (as one who is a recovering alcoholic, I guess he can say that)...

So, completely wasted, these two men are sitting at the bar, arms wrapped around each other, and each guy reassuring the other one how much he loved him. Suddenly, Ivan says to Peter, "Peter, tell me what hurts me"... Bleary eyed, Peter responds "How do I know what hurts you?"

Ivan's answer was swift: "If you don't know what hurts me, how can you say you love me?"

Manning then makes this point: What made Jesus the greatest lover in history is that he really knows what hurts people. Our loneliness, our frustrations, as well as our joys and consolations...

God With Us

Jesus not only understands us, he ‘experienced’ our hurt. When you read the Gospels carefully you see how finely tuned Jesus is to our needs, our hurts, our confusion, our weaknesses, our failures, our misunderstandings... as well as all the things that give us joy and hope. He *really* knows what hurts the human heart.

We see this everywhere in the Gospels - from the adulterous woman anointing Jesus’ feet and drying them with her hair... to Peter who denies even knowing him – three times, while Jesus watches... Jesus responds with compassion.

Or, look at this:

“Seeing the people, He **felt compassion** for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd...” (Matthew 9)

Or this, “When He went ashore, He saw a large crowd, and **felt compassion** for them and healed their sick...” (Matthew 9)

And again, “**Moved with compassion**, Jesus touched their eyes; and immediately they regained their sight and followed Him. (Matthew 20)

Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, "I am willing; be cleansed ." (Mark 1)

In Mark 14, we see a funeral procession...a widow, about to bury her only son. The entire town is processing with her on this terrible day. And, we read, “When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, ‘Don’t cry.’” (And then he raises her son back to life.)

Now, that phrase “his heart went out to her” comes from one Greek word, the same word that was translated ‘compassion’ in all these other references. In fact, the word gets hidden and you don’t realize how often it is used in the New Testament, because it is hard to render in English.

The Greek word is *splagchnizomai*, which comes from the root ‘splagma’, meaning... bowels. In Biblical days people believed that the source of love and pity, or compassion, was ‘the bowels’ –

God With Us

we still find this in our language today as we'll talk about having a 'gut feeling', or describe bad news as being like 'a shot in the gut'. Well, it's the same thing. But because it is hard to translate, when we come across that word in the New Testament (it is used 12 times) we can easily miss the deep, *physical* response that it refers to. It's a very powerful word.

The thing is, we must never forget, when we speak of the compassion of Jesus, that we are speaking of the compassion of the infinite, transcendent, God of all creation –because Jesus was the Word made flesh. What we see in Christ is the character, not just of the Messiah, but of *God* himself. And what we see again and again, as Jesus comes across human hurt, whether resulting from 'acts of nature' (sickness,) or human cruelty and violence, or whether self- inflicted through bad choices and sin, Jesus' response is the same: His gut was wrenched, his heart torn open. Because of the hurt of his people.

Manning puts it very powerfully: Jesus says to us (in these Scriptures), "Don't ever be so foolish as to compare my compassion for you in terms of your compassion for one another. Don't ever be so silly as to compare your thin, pallid, wavering, capricious, fickle, moody, dependent on the circumstances, *human* compassion with mine, for I am God as well as man."

The physical healings in the gospels are a hint – just a hint – of the heart of God for our wounded humanity. What we see in Emmanuel is that the greatest lover in history really knows, *really* knows, what hurts us. There is absolutely nothing that Jesus does not understand about the pain that hangs like a dark cloud over the valley of human history... In his own flesh he feels every separation and loss, every heart broken, every wound of the spirit that refuses to close, all the riven experiences of men, women, and children across the bands of time."

Friends, this is what Christmas is about, this is the meaning of the Incarnation. "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory..."

His *compassion* knows no bounds. Again, the prophet Isaiah

¹¹ *He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.*

Is this your picture of the Messiah?

Or, a better question, perhaps, is this: "Is this your picture of God?"

God With Us

Tim Keller wrote “...Christmas tells us that God became breakable and fragile. God became someone we could hurt. Why? To get us back ... No other religion—whether secularism, Greco-Roman paganism, Eastern religion, Judaism, or Islam—believes God became breakable or suffered, or had a body.”¹

But that’s what God did. Out of his compassion for you. And for me.

Saul and Pilar Cruz, are a married couple who founded Armonia Ministries in Mexico City. They launched their ministry by planting a church on the edge of a huge garbage dump. Starting the church had its challenges. In particular, the people in that area had a difficult time trusting Saul's leadership. Although Saul is a gifted strategist and thinker, he often came across aloof to them. And by his own admission, in the beginning, Saul was unwilling to plunge into the pain and poverty of his people.

But all of that changed one Sunday morning when someone burst into their worship service with a frantic need: the local sewage system had started leaking and then flooding the street. As the sewage continued to gush, the street was on the verge of collapse. This flood threatened to sweep away dozens of nearby homes. To make matters worse, the city informed them that they wouldn't be responding for at least three days.

Saul and a local engineer organized the onlookers and church members to stop traffic and start making sandbags. After working frantically for nearly fifteen hours, by three o'clock the next morning they had finally stopped the flow of sewage. It was cold and drizzling, and Saul was shivering. Exhausted, covered with mud and sewage, Saul and his church members emerged from the pit and walked back to the church. Some of the women there had heated water so the volunteers could wash off the filth.

As they gathered together, Saul started to cry. “I’m sorry,” he said, “but I need to pray. I need to thank God, because he just saved us. He saved you. He saved me. Can we pray?” Then Saul put out his hands as they all held hands and knelt to pray. By the time they had finished praying, Saul had earned their trust, becoming their leader and their friend. Later on, Saul made this comment,

¹ Nancy Guthrie, editor, *Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus* (Crossway Books, 2008), pp. 38-39

God With Us

“People need to see you’re for real—that you really care for them, that you’re even ready to put your life on the edge for them.”

Christmas celebrates the fact that Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, moved into our world, walked into our suffering. Our God isn’t aloof. Our God didn’t plan to bring about justice by standing on the sidelines, pointing out every time we make a wrong step. Our God didn’t simply give us a list of ‘do’s and don’ts’ and saying, ‘there you have it... it’s now up to you.’ (That might be the way *we* would have done it, but its not the way God did it.) No, instead, our God took on flesh. In Jesus he put his life on the edge for us, he descended into the mud and sewage of our world.² In Jesus, we see God’s compassion.

And in Jesus we hear God’s call to us: come, and find life. I understand every hurt, every pain... every loss... I know your despair... I know the frustration of your failures... I understand your insecurity and uncertainties... I know it all. I have not come to crush you. I have come to save you! The only question I ask you, then, is this: “Will you trust me?”

Will you turn away from the things that are destroying you, and follow me? Will you ‘agree with me’ – i.e., will you accept my insight into your life, even when it differs from your own self-rationalizations? I have come that you might have life... you will *only* find this life through me.

Friends, as you know, Christmas is next Saturday. And I have this sense of sadness (as I do every year) thinking that so many who are on the verge of finding Truth this Advent season will put your quest away with the decorations and excess wrappings sometime next week. And perhaps, come next November you will yearn once again for this elusive ‘Christmas spirit’, and again, God will be waiting for you with compassion and love.

Or, perhaps not... we don’t know what this year will bring. There is a reason that the scriptures say ‘Today is the day of salvation.’ There is no more urgent, inviting, wonderful message than the one that Jesus is here *gently, compassionately*, offering to us all today: “*Follow me*”. “Believe in

² Leadership Journal, "Dumping Ground: An Interview with Saul Cruz" (October, 2007)

God With Us

me..." "Put your trust in me" and find real life. Isaiah wrote, "In his name the nations will put their hope."

What about you? What about you?

Will you pray with me?

As we go to prayer I'd like to invite you this morning, if you feel comfortable doing so, to put your hands on your lap in an open position; by this, when we pray, we are asking with our bodies as well as our spirits for God to fill us, to provide a response to our prayers...

And in your hearts pray with me...

O God, we can talk about the nations putting their hope in you, but right here, right now, it comes down to *us*. There are some here today who have said "yes" to your call at some point in the past. If that is you, then thank God in your heart for his presence – it is a promise to you. Jesus says, "I will never leave you or forsake you," And ask the Spirit to reveal to you any ways that perhaps, you have wavered from your commitment... and trust in his forgiveness. Follow him...

There are surely others who are thinking about this for the first time. If that is you, know this: God has brought you to this place. That tugging that you feel in your heart is not preacher manipulation, its not "Christmas spirit", it is the Holy Spirit - the revealer of truth, verifying that you are on the right path.

The Bible says that "...if we confess our sins, God is faithful and righteous (i.e., *just*) and he will forgive us our sins, and cleanse us from every unrighteousness." This is a promise that we can trust because it is based on God's actions, from his compassion for you. Understand this: following Christ is not a one-time decision. It's not some transaction that we can make here, and then walk away from... it is a *life* choice. But if you make it, God promises to be with you – now and always. He promises that he will make you new. He will teach you new things about yourself, the world, and about God. You will find a peace that you never knew was possible, and the joy that comes from – finally – being right with God.

God With Us

If that's what you want, I invite you to pray that in your heart right now... tell that to God. Put it in your own words... but tell the Lord that you're ready to follow him. You're ready to receive his never-ending love and compassion, because there is no other place to find what we are all truly looking for. You will leave here a new creation... *take some time to pray that in your own words.*

Pastor prays...

Just a quick word: if you feel that something is going on in your spirit tonight/ this morning, I want to strongly encourage you to share that with someone you trust. A friend from the church, any staff member. You can send me or pastor HY an email, or leave us a note, and if you do that, we'll contact you with some important information on how to grow as a new believer. *Please* do that – there is nothing that any of us on this staff would rather be doing than helping you find your way in Christ. We'll look forward to hearing from you.

Let's stand and sing our closing song... and let's worship together as we recognize the presence of Christ among us.