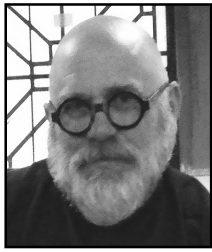


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A Sermon by:

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God Is With Us...What Are We Going to Do?

*Sermon preached at the nine o'clock service, December 22, 2013
The Fourth Sunday of Advent—Based on Matthew 1:18-25*

Reza Aslan in the book *Zealot* describes the first century conditions that shaped Jesus' early life. Aslan tells us that no more than a hundred families lived in Nazareth. "There were no roads, no public buildings. There was no synagogue. The villagers shared a single well from which to draw fresh water. A single bath, fed by a trickle of rainfall captured and stored in underground cisterns, served the entire population. It is a village of mostly illiterate peasants, farmers, and day laborers; a place that did not exist on any map." Aslan goes on to say, "The homes in Nazareth were simple affairs: a single windowless room, divided in two—one room for the family, the other for the livestock—made of whitewashed mud and stone."

Conditions were so grim that I wonder why God did not wait to come into the world until later in history. I am not alone in asking this question. In the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Tim Rice uses the voice of Judas to ask:

"Why'd you choose such a backward time and such a strange land?

You'd have managed better if you'd had it planned

If you'd come today you would have reached a whole nation

Israel in 4 BC had no mass communication."

Well it is true that late 20th century mass communication would have been superior to first century forms of communication, but if God had waited until the 21st century he could have made use of the interactive web. Jesus could have done so much to spread the Gospel using social media if only God had waited for Web 2.0. That is of course if he could have stopped checking Instagram, Twitter and Facebook long enough to preach the Good News. Although we most certainly have developed new ways to communicate, would conditions have been that much better?

Now the obvious answer is that of course our lives are far more comfortable, safer, and longer in the 21st century than in the 1st. But I began to wonder as I read Andrea Elliott's five part *New York Times* story chronicling the life of one of the 22,000 homeless children living in New York City shelters. Dasani, named for the bottled water that she has never tasted, "wakes to the sound of breathing. The smaller children lie tangled beside her, their chests rising and falling under winter coats and wool blankets. A few feet away, their mother and father sleep near the mop bucket they use as a toilet. Two other children share a mattress by the rotting wall where the mice live, opposite the baby, whose crib is warmed by a hair dryer perched on a milk crate. Nearly a quarter of Dasani's childhood has unfolded at Auburn, where she shares a 520-square-foot room with her parents and seven siblings."

The story unfolded over the course of five long articles describing the difficulties and opportunities facing Dasani and others growing up in the New York City shelter system. The primitive and barbaric conditions of the city shelter system, particularly the fact of ten people living in one room without their own bathroom, did not really connect with the infancy narrative in this morning's Gospel until I read the Mayor's response when he was asked about the conditions at the Auburn family shelter. His answer was as old as human history. "This kid was dealt a bad hand. I don't know quite why. That's just the way God works sometimes. Some of us are lucky, and some of us are not."

Blaming a capricious God who doles out good luck and bad luck arbitrarily has always seemed to be a little bit like blaming your boss when something goes bad at work. Your complaint probably is not going to enlighten your boss and certainly is not going to be helpful to your career. Nelson Mandela was asked about poverty once and he said, "Poverty is not an accident. Like slavery and apartheid, it is man made and can be removed by the actions of human beings."

Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber observes there simply is no knowable answer to the question of why there is suffering. But there is meaning. And for Christian people that meaning ends up being related to Jesus—Emmanuel—which means "God with us." We want to go to God for answers, but sometimes what we get is God's presence.

This morning's Gospel lesson tells us of God's presence coming into the world not as a stern judge or a capricious parent. But rather God's presence as an infant, born into one of the darkest places in one of the darkest corners of the world at one of the world's darkest times. A baby is vulnerable in every way and dependent on the support of parents, shepherds, innkeepers and angels to survive.

The image of the infant God is as different from the stories and Christmas cards depicting the baby Jesus as the 1st century is from the 21st. The reality is that infants—unless you are the grandparents or gay uncles—are a lot of work. They call forth care and concern on the part of the adults. No one, not even grandparents and gay uncles, abdicate responsibility around a crying baby. I may indeed return the child to their parents if their parents are at hand because they can often provide the swiftest comfort. But if parents are not available everyone will do anything to calm and comfort the child. For some the response may be empathic; for others it is simply a matter of self-protection.

Someone once said that most of us feel as if we are always on the wrong side of the parental balance of power. As children, we are sure that we live in a totalitarian state run by adults; as adults we learn that we are really living in a totalitarian state run by children.

The reality is that the image of God as an infant can remind us of responsibility. It also should remind us that we cannot go it alone. As Hillary Clinton reminds us, it takes a village to raise children.

Finally, the image of the infant God should call to mind the strong bond between an infant child and parents. The strong bond or attachment between infants and the adults who care for them is so strong that it lasts in good times and bad, throughout life and after life has ended. It inspires superhuman effort and gives meaning to our lives. It is this intimate and powerful bond that the infant God desires as he comes into the world. It is this bond that has the power to help us through our darkest days and will give us power to end poverty, just as others have ended apartheid and slavery. Emmanuel . . . God is with us, and together with God we can end poverty.