

Title: The coming of Advent
 Matt 1:18-25

Because it is the Christmas season, Deb and I were watching a Hallmark Christmas movie last week. (Actually I was watching Deb watching a Hallmark Christmas movie.) It was a heartwarming story of Christmas... I am being facetious. In reality, all Hallmark Christmas stories are the same. There is a man which the woman doesn't like at first. But after some Christmas magic he becomes the love of her life. Very heartwarming but not very original! But the "lack of originality" is not the only problem with Hallmark Christmas movies. While these stories do warm your heart, they are not really stories about Christmas. For a Christian, the season of Christmas means something much more than human love. It is a time when we focus on the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Not only that, but for the Christian, the true Spirit of Christmas is with us not just once a year, but all through the year. The Christmas story it is not just a hallmark romance, but rather it is testimony about our Savior.

In fact, if you think about it, the story told by Matthew in his gospel runs more like a soap opera or an action movie. A man named Joseph has just been engaged to be married to a woman Mary. He has just found out that she is pregnant, but not by him. He's decided to call off the marriage. But an angel appears to him saying, "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. 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." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"— which means, "God with us." Intrigue conflict spiritual power Prophecy! I am surprised that the Bible was not revealed in episodes. "Stay tuned for the next episode of 'the Christ child.'"

On the other hand, the Bible is more of a documentary, rather than a fictional action movie. More like news stories. It speaks of real events... historical events. The Prophecy of which it speaks are Real-life prophecies. The prophet which Matthew talks about is the prophet Isaiah. The prophecy which was given to him came almost 760 years before the birth of Christ. So... our scripture lesson is the first of a series of headline news. A small child miraculously born to a virgin in fulfillment of prophecy. A star mysteriously appears above the city of Bethlehem. Shepherds quoted seeing a crowd of angels announcing the child's birth. Mystery family barely escapes government assassination attempt and is forced to go in hiding in Egypt. No doubt many heard the story and were intrigued.... "Inquiring

minds wanted to know..." Yet, the unfortunate thing was that for many who heard about Jesus in Israel their interest was "curiosity only." For many the story of the miracle birth, the persecution, the escape, like wild stories appearing on the front page of the Enquirer, quickly lost their attention and faded from their mind. "Hey, did you hear the latest about that miracle baby in Bethlehem?" "Nah, old news..." But for those who believed, for those who had faith in God, the news concerning the mystery family was of extreme importance. It wasn't the miraculous nature of the events which concerned St. Matthew. For those "in-the-know" the story of the young family, forced into Egyptian exile, had a deeper meaning. All that had occurred concerning the babe of Bethlehem was a fulfillment of prophecy. Prophecies far older than Nostradamus. Prophecies whose roots pre-dated the Pharaohs of Egypt. Prophecies which spoke of a promise from God. God had promised to His people a redeemer, a savior. All that was happening was to fulfill prophecy. Even today, one cannot understand the true meaning of Christmas unless one realizes that Jesus' birth was the fulfillment of prophecy. One of the reasons why our society today has lost the meaning of Christmas is that it has ignored the divine power which is the core of the story. Christmas is the story of the fulfillment of a prophecy. But the reason that Jesus' birth was headline news was not because it was the fulfillment of just any prophecy. It was not "headline news" because it demonstrated the prophet's power to see the future. Its importance had nothing to do with the prophet at all. This prophecy was important because it linked God with his chosen people. God became "Immanuel," which means "God with us." Jesus Christ was "Immanuel." Jesus Christ, would be "God with us..." God would be with his people, to be with His people, but not just to hang out. God would be among his people, as part of a radical rescue mission to do the things they were unable to do for themselves.

You see, because of their sinfulness Israel was unable to perfectly carry out God's law. For this reason, they were not worthy to be part of God's kingdom. Not only did they fail, but their sinfulness would always drive them to do things against God's will. For that reason, they deserved punishment. When Jesus lived among them as a man, he was able to follow God's laws. Where Israel was led by Temptation into sin, Jesus would be the perfectly obedient Israel. Jesus would live the perfect life demanded by God's law. Because of his perfect life he would deserve eternal life for himself. Jesus was everything that Israel was not. Jesus was the redeemed Israel. But Jesus was more than the redeemed Israel. He would do more than live with us. He would do more than just be God among us. He would be the redemption of Israel as well. When God saw the distress of the Israelites in Egypt under the bondage of Pharaoh, he came to be with them to save them. As a pillar of fire and a cloud of smoke he led them into his promised land.

When God saw the distress of mankind in bondage to sin, he sent himself to be with them in the person of Jesus Christ. As the Messiah, the Christ, he would save them from the bondage to sin and to lead them into His promised land. According to God's prophecies not only would there be a restoration of one of Israel's descendants... but of all Israel. There would be, in fact, restoration for all mankind. Redemption for us, for you and for me. This was the reason why his birth was headline news. For those "in the know," THIS is why we celebrate Christmas. Because of Jesus God became Man. It was on the cross that God inflicted the sufferings of Hell which the sins of Mankind earned, inflicted them upon Man, inflicted upon Jesus. It was also on the cross that God's love for his people was shown and the redemption of his people was won. Jesus came as a human baby to bear our sins for us that we might become the sons of God. THIS is the deeper Christmas message. This is the meaning of Christmas which is ignored by the secular world. Jesus was born a human baby so that he might bear the punishment for sin which we were unable to bear.

But there is more, because he is Immanuel. because he is God, with us, because he is one of us, we have a God who knows our weaknesses as only "one who has been one of us" could know. Why is this important? Because it shows us that we have a compassionate God. Compassion is "the ability to identify and feel the pain of others." The good news is that our Lord has lived as we live. He has suffered the same temptations. Felt the pains of living in a mortal body. He knows our weaknesses against sin. And He is compassionate. We have a God who is Immanuel "God with us." God IS us. We know that we have a God who does not want to punish us, but rather we have a compassionate God, who wants good for us. When we pray, we do not talk to someone far away, who is separate from the problems we face every day We have a compassionate God, who knows our troubles... who cares about our troubles.

In summary... our God is one who loves us, who has been with us and is one of us, a living man. Our God is one who has entered history as a babe in Bethlehem. It is this God whose birth we celebrate this Christmas season. It is this God who still works in us today. The work of Christ is still on-going and as Christians we are now a part of it. The headline news which heralded his birth, simply prophesied his work on the cross. Likewise, His death on the cross, prophesizes his second coming, His coming again in power. As Christians we look forward to the completion of the prophecy when he comes to earth again, not as a babe, but as our King in glory. Christmas is not only for December 25. But it is for the whole year. The true spirit of Christmas is that God himself, out of love, so entwined himself with mankind that he took on flesh and blood to bear our sins. And in doing so

knows intimately our needs, our temptations, our weaknesses, our pains. Not only is he one of us. WE are His. Because we are His, we know that He has plans of good for us. And these plans will never fail, for scripture tells us that - *“neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, ... will be able to separate us from the love of God.” [Rom 8:38]* May the true spirit of Christmas be with you always and bless you every day. Amen.