

Emmanuel in hard times

[Luke 2:1-14\(15-20\)](#)

What a year its been! Or more accurately, what a nine months it's been! For just about as long as Mary was pregnant with Jesus, we have been living with the coronavirus and the restrictions, fear. Illness and death that it has brought.

And so we come to this special night: the night when we remember the birth of Jesus the Christ as a tiny baby in the Middle East.

When I think of the Middle East I think of conflict, of volatile political situations which often flare into violence and war. Isn't it strange that the people who God chose, the Israelites, lived in a small strip of land which has been a center of human conflict for millennia? And isn't it strange that God became a totally helpless infant entirely dependent on human parents in the middle of a foreign occupation?

If we read further into Matthew's gospel we find that conflict was centered around Jesus right from the start. While the shepherds were rejoicing, Magi from the east were traveling to find him. They alerted Herod the Great that the Messiah had been born. Herod, who was allowed to be King under the thumb of the Romans, was seriously threatened. After all he was the King of the Jews. So he plotted to kill the child. As a result, in Matthew's gospel the beautiful night when the Prince of Peace is born is juxtaposed against the cruel night when all the small boys of the village were slaughtered.

Fortunately, Joseph had been warned in a dream and taken Jesus and Mary to safety. Jesus may have grown up in safety but as a man he would be once again at the center of controversy and violence.

I'm seeing a pattern here and I hope you are too.

God comes where there is conflict. God comes where there is difficulty. God does not choose to be born in the palaces or the big mansions of the

wealthy and powerful but in the confusion of a census, to ordinary people living in the midst of conflict. God does not come to us just in the peace of a Christmas night with the carols and the angels. God comes in the middle of our pain and difficulty.

Of course it's more difficult to see God there. When your heart is beating way too fast, when you can't stop crying or seem to get a breath, it seems like God is a long way away.

In the middle of the pandemic when the numbers keep rising and we all know someone who is ill or has died, at a time when the inequalities of our society are being seen more and more starkly, at a time when the climate crisis is growing and growing... that is exactly when God is born in... that is exactly when Emmanuel appears.

But we might miss it!

The shepherds wouldn't have known if they hadn't been awake and seen the angels. The magi wouldn't have known if they hadn't been amazed by the star. And they expected that the Messiah would be born in Jerusalem – a simple mistake but one that we might make.

Where do you expect to find God?

Perhaps in meditation, in prayer, in a walk by the ocean, in a beautiful sunset, in the company of loved ones, in the shared sacrament...

Yes God is there. God is here.

And yet our God seems to specialize in the dark places. Our God seems to come to those who honestly seek him or her when they are in the midst of difficulty. This dark time in the life of our nation is exactly where Emmanuel – God with us – is most likely to show up.

So we need to keep our eyes open and our ears pinned. It's kinda exciting... where will we meet God? In what unlikely place will God be born?

We know that things have changed, they have moved on, we will never go back to where we were or who we were in early March. Too much has happened. But what we don't know is what God is doing in the middle of it all. We don't know what is being born.

Childbirth is rarely easy. The mothers among us will attest that giving birth is usually hard, painful labor. This dark time of coronavirus will lead to something unexpected, some new birth of Emmanuel.

And we, the people of God, we get to be the shepherds who give witness to the new birth. We get to hear the stirring of angel wings in the unexpected places, when we are working from home, sheltering in place or staying 6 feet away from others; in the unexpected places of distance from family or loneliness at a time of traditional community, we get to hear the angel chorus heralding the coming, no the very presence, of the most High God where we least expect her.

God has not abandoned us in this season of pain.

The good news of the gospel is that God comes alongside us in our pain as well as in our joy. When Matthew tells us about the children of Bethlehem being killed, he quotes a verse from the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah about Rachel weeping for her children. It is very sad. But if you read on in Jeremiah, things change in the next verse and now "there is hope for your future says the Lord." (Jer 31:15-17)

The good news of the gospel is that God comes alongside us in our pain as well as our joy. Emmanuel is here, Emmanuel is being born in this pandemic, Emmanuel is here, right here. And in Emmanuel there is hope for our future. There is hope because we are not alone; God has taken on flesh and blood; God has become human.

Let us hear the song of the angels and follow in the footsteps of the shepherds as we look for where God is being born this Christmas.

