

My soul magnifies
the LORD,
and my spirit rejoices
in God my Savior,
for he has looked
with favor on the
lowliness of his
servant.
Luke 1:47-48



It seems almost trite and superfluous to say that the incarnation is the greatest statement, the greatest manifestation of love ever – but that doesn't make it untrue. The name Immanuel – God with us – is a profound and powerful statement of God's desire to be in intimate communion with human beings. The challenge for us is to recognise God's presence in all situations and circumstances. We can doubt God's love in times of grief, pain and trauma, but we find comfort, healing and strength when we are able to experience God's "with-us-ness" even in such times. And, when we are able to help others to recognise and experience God's presence and love in their lives – whatever they may be going through – then we have truly become Advent people.

May our worship overflow with proclamation and experience of God's ever-present love this week.

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INTRODUCTIONS

For use by lectors, in order of service, parish bulletins and magazines

The First Reading - Isaiah 7: 10-16

A young woman will give her son the name Immanuel, meaning 'God is with us'. Isaiah's words were meant as encouragement to King Ahaz in dangerous times, but for us they will always have the profound meaning fulfilled in Mary and the birth of Jesus.

The Psalm - Psalm 80: 1-7, 17-19

A prayer for God to forgive and restore God's people, and to send and empower the One God raises up to keep God's people from turning away from God.

The Second Reading - Romans 1: 1-7

On the last Sunday before Christmas Day, we hear a reminder from Paul of the content of the Good News: that prophecy is fulfilled, that Christ is born a son of David, that he died and rose again - and calls us into his company.

The Gospel Reading - Matthew 1: 18-25

Mary conceives a child by divine grace, and to the worried Joseph there appears a dreamlike messenger with stranger words of assurance. This strange circumstance is safe in divine hands. '... and she will call her son Immanuel'.

[Click here to view the readings](http://bible.oremus.org/?show_adj=no&passages=Isaiah%207:%2010-16%0Acw%20Psalm%2080:%201-7,%2017-19%0ARomans%201:%201-7%0AMatthew%201:%2018-25)

[http://bible.oremus.org/?](http://bible.oremus.org/?show_adj=no&passages=Isaiah%207:%2010-16%0Acw%20Psalm%2080:%201-7,%2017-19%0ARomans%201:%201-7%0AMatthew%201:%2018-25)

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LIGHTING THE ADVENT CANDLE

CHILD/YOUTH: The season of Advent continues. Today we shall be lighting the candle of love.

ADULT: No other word so completely describes what we know of our God. For God so loved the world that a child was given....God's love in human form.

CHILD/YOUTH: We wait in hope and peace, and with joy.

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The two purple candles and the pink candle are lit

ADULT: We light the candle of love to proclaim that God's love is revealed in the Child born in Bethlehem, and we are challenged to proclaim and reveal that same love as we live out our faith here in Ireland.

The purple candle is lit

We give thanks for a love that passes our human understanding, and we await once more the birth of God's enduring love this Christmas.
Amen

COLLECTS OF THE DAY

Collect One

Lord,
we beseech thee, give ear to our prayers,
and by thy gracious visitation
lighten the darkness of our hearts
by our Lord Jesus Christ;
who liveth and reigneth with thee
and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Collect Two

God our redeemer,
who prepared the blessed Virgin Mary
to be the mother of your Son:
Grant that, as she looked for his coming as our saviour,
so we may be ready to greet him
when he comes again as our judge;
who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE 1

Loving God - as we approach the day of Christ's birth help us to throw wide the doors of our hearts in preparation. Help us to sense the importance of what happened so long ago when Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel, to remember the words of the angels and the prophets and the teachers of old, and to celebrate all the promises that you made through them. Help us to take firm hold of the meaning of all these things and to know in the depths of

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our being that even now you are seeking to work in us and through us to fulfil the promises you have made.... Lord hear our prayer....

Lord - may this Christmas season be for us and for those around us a season of healing, may it be a season of hope and of love and of joy, may it be a time of true sharing and of rejoicing in all the earth.... Lord hear our prayer...

We pray O God for those in need around us: for those who need a second birth, for those who need a tender touch and a healing word.... Lord, hear our prayer...

We pray too, O God for the children of our world - and all those of tender faith, all those who have no home to call their home, all those who are hungry and thirsty. Bless we pray the innocent of the earth and all those who trust in you. Bless the humble and the powerless and bring down from their thrones those who full of pride and those who are indifferent... Lord, hear our prayer....

Bless we pray, too, each special one we name before you now... (BIDDING PRAYER).... Lord hear our prayer....

We ask these things O God, with hope and praise in our hearts, our minds, and our souls, through Christ Jesus our Lord, Amen.

— written by Richard J. Fairchild, and posted on his [Kir-shalom](#) website.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE 2

Presider or deacon

As we wait with pregnant expectation for the coming of Jesus, let us offer prayers to God who sends his Son in the womb of a virgin.

Deacon or other leader

For the peace of the world, and for our unity in Christ.

Come, O Lord, and save us.

For N our bishop and all bishops, for the presbyters, for the deacons and all who minister in Christ, and for all the holy people of God.

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Come, O Lord, and save us.

For the church throughout the world and the faithful in every place.

Come, O Lord, and save us.

For the leaders of the nations and all in authority.

Come, O Lord, and save us.

For justice, peace, and freedom among peoples of the earth.

Come, O Lord, and save us.

For travellers, for the sick and the suffering, for the hungry and the oppressed, and for those in prison.

Come, O Lord, and save us.

For the dying and the dead.

Come, O Lord, and save us.

For our deliverance from all affliction, strife, and need.

Come, O Lord, and save us.

Joining our voices with St _____ and with all the saints and angels of God, let us offer ourselves and one another to the living God through Christ.

To you, O Lord.

Presider

O Emmanuel, our king and lawgiver, desire of all nations and saviour of all peoples, come and save us, O Lord our God. Glory to you for ever.

Amen.

POST COMMUNION

Heavenly Father,
you have given us a pledge of eternal redemption.
Grant that we may always eagerly celebrate
the saving mystery of the incarnation of your Son.
We ask this through him whose coming is certain,
whose day draws near,
your Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

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PRAYERS

O God of Elizabeth and Mary,
you visited your servants with news of the world's redemption
in the coming of the Savior.
Make our hearts leap with joy,
and fill our mouths with songs of praise,
that we may announce glad tidings of peace,
and welcome the Christ in our midst. Amen.

Brothers and sisters,
as we joyfully await the glorious coming of the Christ,
let us pray for the needs of the church, our community, and the world.
God of promise,
you have given us a sign of your love
through the gift of Jesus Christ, our Savior,
who was promised from ages past.
We believe as Joseph did
the message of your presence
whispered by an angel,
and offer our prayers for your world,
confident of your care and mercy for all creation. Amen.

Shepherd of Israel,
may Jesus, Emmanuel and son of Mary,
be more than just a dream in our hearts.
With the apostles, prophets, and saints,
save us, restore us,
and lead us in the way of grace and peace,
that we may bear your promise into the world. Amen.

Dearest God, as we contemplate the wonder of your birth, that you gave up
your majesty to become weak and vulnerable for us;
stir up in us the desire to consider
the needs and feelings of others,
before we think of ourselves.
Help us to be so willing to give of ourselves
that we may be an encouragement
to all whom we meet this Christmas time. Amen.

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All-powerful God, let the splendour of your glory rise in our hearts like the dawn, that the darkness of the night may be scattered and the coming of your only Son may reveal us as children of the light. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen

Let us rejoice in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of life. By Him we are born into the family of God, and made members of the body of Christ; His witness confirms us; His wisdom teaches us; His power enables us; He will do for us far more than we ask or think. Amen

God of the past, present and the future, of the old covenant and the new, speak to us today. Amen

Come, O Lord, in much mercy down into my soul and take possession and dwell there. A poor dwelling, I confess, for so glorious a Person as You. Yet, I am preparing for a fitting reception of you, by holy and fervent desires of your own inspiring. Enter then, and adorn my soul, and make it a worthy place for you to inhabit, since it is the work of your own hands. Give me yourself, without which, even if you should give me all that you ever have made, yet this would not satisfy my desires. Let my soul ever seek you, and let me persist in seeking, until I have found, and am in full possession of you. Amen. St. Augustine of Hippo (354 - 430)

The God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the eternal covenant, make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is well-pleasing in his sight; and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among you and remain with you always. Amen

BENEDICTION

Go into this week blessed with the assurance that you are beloved by God, valued by Jesus Christ, strengthened by the Holy Spirit

Isn't it strange . . . that things sometimes don't turn out the way you expect them to . . .

It would be quite easy to imagine Joseph, Mary and their extended families preparing for the forthcoming marriage. Betrothal was an important social institution in the ancient world and parents or grandparents arranged marriage for their children from birth. Since social order in the ancient world was built upon relationships between extended families, marriage was a primary means to strengthen political alliances and economic ties between these families.

Normally, women from each clan would propose and negotiate the nuptial arrangement; the clan leaders would approve the union. So the proposed marriage of Mary and Joseph would have been common knowledge in their small community for many months, if not years. And just as Mary had been betrothed, she became pregnant. This certainly was not in the wedding plans of the mothers! It probably wasn't on Joseph's agenda either. Suddenly all that seemed to have been under control was thrust into turmoil. This wasn't turning out the way it was supposed to – all the best laid plans seemed to be in tatters.

Because God had other ideas.

But the scope of His plan was mind boggling: a virgin birth. Like Joseph, we are sometimes challenged by the magnitude of God's plan for our own lives, especially if it doesn't necessarily fall in with our own small designs. God's will and our vision can often differ. Joseph was changed because of God's plan for his life. Written about 730 BC, the reading from Isaiah shows the threads of God's plan were laid long before Joseph was born and affect millions of people 2000 years after his death. And just as Joseph was changed by God's plan for his life, so we need to be open to be changed by his plan for us. As we reflect on the nativity, perhaps Christmas is a good time to ask ourselves how has God's plan affected each one of us personally? How has it changed our lives in ways which we've been unable to predict, ways which have

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surprised us, ways in which we did not plan?

Culture and experience tell us to take control, to plan for the future, and trust in our own abilities. A common question asked by management consultants is, 'Who is really in Control here?', shortly followed by, 'What decisions need to be made and who can make them?' They would have a hard time with the Christmas story, because Christmas presents an alternate view, a view which requires trust in God and the notion of someone else being in control. Life may get in the way of our plans, but we will have the strength to survive and thrive because we trust the One who is really in control.

We might not be in control - but God is.

And as we look towards the New Year perhaps its also a good time to ask ourselves what plans God may have for us in the coming year. Are we open to Him taking even just a little control? Dare we be as obedient to His call and plan as Joseph was? Do we believe that God might just want us to affect others so that His Kingdom comes, on earth, as in heaven? I wish you all a blessed Christmas and peaceful New Year. *The Reverend Dr Sam Cappleman*

LECTIONARY NOTES 2

'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Emmanuel', a name which means 'God with us', a name which signifies that two natures are united in this one person. Before time began He was God, born of the Father - but in the fullness of time he became Emmanuel, 'God with us', in the womb of his mother. Without ceasing to be what he had always been, he began in a wonderful fashion to be what we are, assuming our nature in such a way that he did not lose his own. But His coming was not all plain sailing!

By law, on hearing of her pregnancy, Joseph would have been entitled to return Mary to her father and expose her to death. But Joseph is an honourable man and determines to divorce her

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quietly. Perhaps in his sense of honour he hopes that the rightful father will claim the child and marry Mary. But even more remarkable is that here, in the first chapter of the first book of the New Testament, we begin to get the sense that the rules of the game are changing. That the strictures of the law which had guided the nations of Israel and Judah were beginning to be seen in a new light, a new light that demonstrated that the new era of living under grace and not the law was dawning as Emmanuel was indeed with us. An 'Emmanuel' who was not a product of human evolution, some pinnacle which represented the highest achievement of humanity to date, but an 'Emmanuel', as the name implies, who was, and is, the intervention of the transcendent God into human history from outside. Even as He was conceived, the law was beginning to be fulfilled as Joseph, mindful of the law, decided to believe the Lord that had spoken to him in a dream.

Unlike Ahaz in the Old Testament reading, Joseph seems to be open to believing that he might just be hearing the word of God, and acts on that belief. Ahaz, it would appear, preferred to believe in his own strength and a treaty with the king of Assyria! Joseph is open to hear the word of the Lord, even in his dreams. Ahaz, on the other hand, is closed, trusting only in his treaty. Joseph believes the promise of God and names the child "Jesus" in obedience to the dream, claiming him as his own. Ahaz refuses the promise of God, and suffers serious consequences. The king he trusted to protect him comes and conquers his land. If Joseph had acted like Ahaz, he would have trusted his own inclination and dismissed Mary quietly. If Ahaz had acted like Joseph, who knows how the history of God's people would have been changed?

The Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is both a mystery and a miracle. It's the stuff of Hollywood movies. A young virgin conceives a divine Son, a quiet boyfriend who believes in angels enough to listen to them, some poor agricultural labourers working at night going to see what all the fuss and commotion is about and ending up in a stable of smelly animals. And later, Eastern mystics turn up on the scene after allegedly following stars to get there to see what's happening and leave hugely expensive Christmas presents. And that's before the massacre of the innocents, the exile into Egypt, and the bizarre events of Jesus' early childhood. It would have been so easy for Joseph to believe that it had all been just a dream

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But it wasn't just a dream, it wasn't a story in a Hollywood movie, it was the reality of an incarnate God coming among us. When we reflect on the Christmas story do we believe that God can still speak to us and intervene in the world today as He spoke to Joseph and intervened that first Christmas? Or do we think it was all just a dream? *Sam Cappleman*

LECTIONARY NOTES

3

Isaiah 7:10–16

During this season of Advent, it is easy to read the prophet Isaiah and immediately jump to the birth of Jesus. Isaiah is directly quoted in Matthew's gospel, which we also read today: Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. While it is not wrong for us to understand who Jesus is in light of this text, we must also recognize that the prophet Isaiah was not predicting a future when Mary would give birth to God incarnate. Isaiah's project is one that is much more immediate and much more involved.

If you read the fullness of Isaiah's text beginning at 7:1, you see that the prophet is arguing with King Ahaz who has allied himself with the Assyrian empire. At this time in history, the Jewish people were split between the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. As the Assyrian empire expanded, Isaiah was sent by the northern kingdom to call Judah into alliance with Israel against a common enemy. When King Ahaz refuses, Isaiah says that a child—an innocent—will come with a name that means "God with us," but that child will see the destruction and ruin of Judah.

Isaiah's prophecy is about how even in the face of atrocities, God is with us. Jesus, who came in love to reconcile humanity to God and one another, is one way we see that prophecy come about, but it was certainly not what Isaiah or Ahaz expected.

- What ideas or issues split us as people of God today?
- How does our story as told in scripture lead us to reconcile those differences?
- Is there an Advent practice that could help foster reconciliation and love in our church/community/world?

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Psalm 80:1–7, 16–18

Restore us, O God of hosts; *
show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.

This refrain is repeated in Psalm 80 in verses 2, 7, and 18. It is the cry the psalmist makes on behalf of the people of Israel that shapes the arc of the psalm. The people in darkness and despair cry out for God to bring light into the world. Although our Prayer Book translation of the psalm is beautiful, it does not always capture the subtleties of the Hebrew. In Hebrew, each repetition of this prayer builds upon the last.

v.3 - Restore us O God (elohim)

v.7 - Restore us O God of Hosts (elohim tseva'oth)

v.18 - Restore us O Yahweh, God of Hosts (yahweh elohim tseva'oth)

Try not to get too bogged down in the Hebrew, but do notice that with each cry for help, the psalmist grows in knowledge of God and who God is. The cry moves from the generic word for god to a specific god, God of Hosts, to an actual naming of God, Yahweh, God of Hosts.

Also telling in this prayer is that the psalmist asks for the light of God's countenance - light from the face of God. We know from Exodus 33:20 that no one can see God's face and live. That is the gift of Jesus - a God whom we can name, know, and look in the face comes into the world to spread light and life.

- Where in this world do you see the face of God?
- What words or modifiers would you use to describe God as you have known God?
- What prayer would you write for your church/community/self to pray every day this final week of Advent?

Romans 1:1–7

If we break up into parts this opening greeting from Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul basically does three things: he identifies himself as a servant of Jesus, he identifies who Jesus is, and he offers greetings and blessings to Jesus' people in Rome. It is a passage full of statements of identity—who Paul is, who Jesus is, and who we, the church, are.

Paul first talks about himself in relationship to Jesus. He is a servant of Jesus, he is called by Jesus to be an apostle, and he is set apart for the gospel, or

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good news, of Jesus. Paul's identity is completely wrapped up in his relationship to Jesus. In verse 6, that identity is shared with the people in Rome who are also "called to belong to Jesus Christ."

Sandwiched between these two statements of identity is a rich statement of who Jesus is. Jesus is described as "descended from David," "flesh," "Son of God," "resurrected," and "Lord." Even Jesus' interactions with us are laid out: Jesus gives us grace, establishes our faith, and brings in the Gentiles.

Paul, Jesus, the church in Rome, and even we who are followers of Jesus today are all enmeshed together in God's creation. Paul is establishing in this salutation that all of us are connected to one another and to God in the person of Jesus.

- What is your relationship to Jesus? How do you express that?
- How do you talk to others about the good news of Jesus? Or do you?
- How can we as a church and as individuals better live into our identity as followers of Jesus?

Matthew 1:18–25

In this passage from Matthew's gospel, names and relationships are very important. Just prior to this passage, Matthew gives a detailed genealogy that links Jesus to David, the great king of Israel, by naming all of Joseph's ancestors. Jesus' mother Mary and father Joseph are named, and the love Joseph has for Mary is revealed when he is unwilling to publically disgrace her for being pregnant. When the angel of the Lord appears to Joseph, the angel calls Joseph by name and notes his lineage from David and his relationship with Mary. Furthermore, the angel tells Joseph to name the child Jesus which means "God saves." Even in Matthew's commentary after the story, he recalls the prophecy from Isaiah who speaks of a child who will be named Emmanuel which means "God with us."

Names mean something here. When we love someone or know someone well, we call them by their name, and our relationship is strengthened. Names also sometimes carry their own meaning. According to Jewish practice, Yahweh, God's name, is not spoken in order to give it a sense of holiness. When God became one of us, however, he receives a rather common name, Jesus, which is a shortened version of the Hebrew name Joshua. The fact that Jesus has such a normal name and yet it means something tremendous - "God saves" - tells us something about God and how God interacts with us in this world.

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Note all the contradictions in this story. Joseph is a simple man, yet descended from King David. Mary is in a situation that could ruin her socially, yet Joseph loves her and she bears the son of God. Jesus is given a simple, common name, yet it lays out God's plan of salvation for the world. Matthew points out the greatness of this name and this plan through recalling the prophecy of Isaiah where a child will be called Emmanuel - God with us. It is a reminder to look for God's presence in one another because God is with us in the common and everyday.

- What names or titles would you give God?
- Have you ever found God in unexpected or common places?
- What does your name tell about your story?

A WORD WITH THE CHILDREN/YOUNG PEOPLE -

There is a beautiful hymn which has these words in it "Love came down at Christmas,

Love all lovely, Love divine". Ask the children/young people if they can say why the words were written like that - "Love" came down - whose love? and why? If you have a printed order of service and have used the Advent wreath liturgy above, tell them that the answer is there...

God's love for us became visible in a person - when Jesus was born. Before that, people could only talk about God's love in an abstract way - but in Jesus that love could be seen and experienced. That's why the hymn says "Love was born at Christmas, star and angels gave the sign." Show the cardboard cutout (*suggestion below*) and ask them if they know who it is supposed to be...

hopefully they'll say 'Jesus'... turn the board over and show the word "Love" and say that Jesus didn't have to go around with the word written on his back (*like the cutout*) as God's love was so much a part of him that everything he did grew out of that love.

Christmas is that special time when we show our love for others in visible ways to people we know (ask how) and to people we don't even know - this is an opportunity to speak about the Christmas Bowl. Jesus, however, wants us to be loving and kind all year, not just at Christmas. As the last verse of the hymn says - "Love shall be our token" - that means that our love will remind people of God's love and Jesus' love, because we will do loving and caring deeds and speak loving and caring words as often as we possibly can.

Either sing "Love came down at Christmas" or sing "Away in a manger

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On a piece of firm cardboard draw a picture of baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes.

Cut around the picture and turn it over.

Print the word LOVE taking up as much of the space as possible. Fill background in with dark colour.

About 28cms (11 inches) long and 17 cms (6 1/2 inches at widest part) would suffice in most churches!

SERMON OUTLINE

Matt 1:18-23 She will give birth to a son

Imagine life in 1stC Nazareth - dirty little town - hard work, long hours, drudgery of peasant life - not easy...

1. The Pledge of M & J - *to be married* - they were betrothed - following engagement - legally binding commitment of 1 year - needed divorce to break it!

2. The Plight of M & J - a baby on the way - major crisis!

a) for Mary - what would Joseph think/say!! *he was a righteous man* - zealous for God & the ways of God - for truth & right... Would he believe that she was *with child thr the HSp*?

b) for Joseph - What would the neighbours think/say?? It was a time of inner turmoil for him too! > only solution - *he did not want to expose her to public disgrace* - the penalty for such unfaithfulness was death by stoning (Deut 22), so *he had in mind to divorce her quietly* by signing the necessary legal documents.. But he had other problems too - how would Mary & baby survive???

3. The Pleasure of M & J - from **CRISIS** to **CHRIST!** God takes a hand - *an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream*

a) the Work of the Spirit - *what is conceived in her is from the HSp* - the mighty miracle of the Virgin Birth - historic creeds...

b) the Work of the Saviour - *You are to give him the name "Jesus" for he shall save his people from their sins* - the **Mission of the Saviour** - the **Message of the Scriptures** - still being fulfilled in our generation & every generation - in all who turn to him in faith & trust/ believe in Him as Lord & Saviour... **1Tim 1.15: CJ came into the world to save sinners.**

By Norman Porteous

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SERMON

[\[RCL\]: Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25](#)

Fourth Sunday in Advent, and one wonders: What remains to be said about the season?

Year after year, preachers and priests must wonder: How can one tell the story of Jesus' birth without falling into historical and cultural clichés, without being accused of mythologizing? Or: Without being accused of not following the Scriptures word for word? How can we make the familiar exciting again?

It is so difficult to preach on the birth narratives that most pastors and priests find it easier to let the story be told by the children, in their Christmas pageants—something beloved by almost all parishes. Presenting the story of Jesus' birth dramatically, rather than in a sermon from the pulpit, may be the better solution. Why try to retell the most beautiful story ever told when it is already written so simply and perfectly by Matthew and so masterfully by Luke?

The simple beauty of the story as found in the two gospels cannot be improved upon. Only great artists have found another way – through their works of art – to help us see with new eyes. Centuries later people still flock to the world's great museums to see depictions of the Birth story by the finest of painters. A few well known artists come to mind: da Vinci, Caravaggio, El Greco and so many others not as well known. Their creations tell the stunning story of God entering the human realm. Nothing proclaims the Christmas news as movingly as some of these works. And it is not only visual artists who accomplish this.

The most evocative poetry has been written about that one night in Bethlehem, while the great composers continue to lift us to a heavenly realm when as they sing of this unique birth. Please, pause for a minute and try to think if any song as exquisite to your ears as the melody and words of “Lo, how a rose e’re blooming on tender stem hath sprung . . .” And now recall the words of Christina Rossetti’s poem, “In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan, earth stood still as iron, water like a stone . . .” Each word is a jewel.

Now sing it to the melody by Holst and let your heart melt within you. Isn't that the ultimate Christmas feeling? This is a deliberate question. At Christmas time we want to feel, not to think. This is why children are so happy at Christmas; they allow themselves to feel anticipation and joy without worrying about practical details that ultimately don't matter.

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When we grow up and reach maturity, we tend to examine the words we say and sing. We ask questions about their meaning, questions that in all probability cannot be answered. “If the birth of Jesus really happened as the gospel writers tell us, what happened to the promises of peace on earth, good will toward all human beings?” After we look at the world around us and despair of the answers we do receive, many of us turn to books and theology, and that too is helpful. It is good to examine the questions, but let us admit it: these are at best intellectual exercises.

Let us instead throw ourselves into the music and drama of the story and perhaps then we shall find peace and even joy. It is undeniable that visual art, music, poetry, and drama take us out of ourselves as they communicate the gospel story in ways that bring us peace and even joy. The story of Jesus from his birth to his death and resurrection is the perfect drama.

The great Dorothy L Sayers in her masterpiece, *The Man Born to Be King*, writes that for the dramatist the theology in the story of Jesus “locks the whole structure into a massive intellectual coherence.” She continues: “It is scarcely possible to build up anything lopsided, trivial, or unsound on that steely and gigantic framework.” And she fulfilled this conviction by writing, in 1943, her twelve radio plays on “The Man Born to Be King.” Very few had attempted a dramatic presentation of the life of Jesus before her. Only medieval plays and the depiction in Oberammergau had done so. Yet, the ancient Greeks worshiped by going to the theater; seeing the great tragedies of their myths was a religious experience. Theater started as a religious expression.

We also, citizens of this already troubled twenty-first century, enjoy the emotional appreciation of the nativity story fully when we see it acted out. But it doesn't mean much in the long run unless we make the effort to move from the enjoyment and emotion to this “massive intellectual coherence” which is so effective as drama. We cannot remain starry-eyed in the worship of an infant; we must move forward to the ministry of the man Jesus without losing the mystery of the divine drama. How can we possibly tell in ordinary words this stunning, startling event of God's breaking through in what has been called “the scandal of particularity,” of the Timeless entering Time?

It so troubling to many of us in this season to talk to Christians who speak of the coming of Jesus without trembling at the thought of the Incarnation, of God deliberately taking on flesh! This fearful, truly awesome reality has become so ordinary for us that we mention it without really taking it in. It is such an unprecedented event, this unique event in history, that Matthew and Luke tell it in the simplest terms but with heavenly imagery.

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And therein lies the drama. A very pregnant virgin and her husband travel over difficult terrain from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Both the virgin and her future husband are visited by angels. Angels break through and sing of glory after the baby is born, while animals and the poorest of the poor gather around a little baby to sing of peace and good will. How else can something so dramatic be told in order to shake us out of complacency?

St. Paul gives it a try in the opening greeting of his letter to the Romans, the passage we read today, and ends up trying to contain the immense drama in 102 Greek words that form one long sentence. He speaks of “. . . his Son, who descended from David according to the flesh and was declared Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead,” and the sentence is still not finished.

He trips over his words in speaking of this astounding event. But when writing to the Philippians he succeeds fully in utter and profound simplicity: “He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,” he says of the eternal, the cosmic Christ. This is what Matthew means when he writes that the angel said to Joseph: “. . . for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” We imagine Joseph hiding his face and thinking, “I don’t understand any of it, but I will do as you say.”

The excellent American folklorist, John Jacob Niles, heard three words sung in the Appalachian town of Murphy, North Carolina and went on to compose the heart-breaking, simple melody and words of “I wonder as I wander right under the sky how Jesus the Savior did come for to die. . .” We must never stop wondering.

To move from drama and simplicity to the greatness and baroque richness of Bach and Handel, is to experience fully the reality that God dwells also in the beauty of sound. The whole drama of the biblical story of the Christ, from the Fall to the song of the angels and beyond, is found in Handel’s masterpiece Messiah. Those of us who have sung this oratorio through many years have memorized, together with the music, the words of the great prophets. Thanks to Handel and his brilliant lyricist, Charles Jennens, who poured over the Authorized Version, countless folks who have never read the Bible have memorized the most beautiful and comforting words of Scripture!

“Comfort ye my people.”

“Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill made low; the crooked, straight. . .”

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“He shall feed his flock like a shepherd and carry them in his bosom.”

And from today’s lesson: “Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel, God with us.”

God with us! What a wondrous promise. What a loving reality. Hold on to that. Hold on to the drama of the Eternal entering Time, of the Invisible becoming Visible in the face of Jesus, a baby in human form who grew up to show us the heart of God. And enter into the season of Christmas with the feelings of a child and the meditations of wise Christians. Immanuel: the mystery and glory of the Incarnation.

ONLINE SERMON SOURCES

Three on the Matthew reading -

The Blind Leap, Rev. Daniel Matthews, *Day 1*

http://day1.org/2387-the_blind_leap

Believe in the prayers of the person who loves you - the Very Rev. Samuel G. Candler, *Day 1*

http://day1.org/1070-believe_in_the_dreams_of_the_person_you_love

A new world birthed, the Rev. Dr. Walter Brueggemann, *Day 1*

http://day1.org/622-a_new_world_birtherd

CHILDREN

[Worshiping with Children](#),

Including children in the congregation's worship, using the Revised Common Lectionary, Carolyn C. Brown,

<http://worshipingwithchildren.blogspot.co.uk/2013/08/year-fourth-sunday-of-advent-december.html>

["Gathering Advent 2013,"](#) Fran Woodruff, *On The Chancel Steps*.

<http://onthechancelsteps.wordpress.com/2013/11/17/gathering/>

["Sermon of the Week,"](#) / ["Mensajes para ninos,"](#) Sermons 4 Kids, Charles Kirkpatrick, Object Lessons & Children's Sermons, Coloring Pages, Puzzles. Sermons4Kids.com.

<http://www.sermons4kids.com/>

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HYMN SUGGESTIONS

1st Reading Isaiah 7: 10–16

146* A great and mighty wonder
151* Child in the manger
160* Hark! the herald—angels sing
133* Long ago, prophets knew
168* Lord, you were rich beyond all splendour
135* O come, O come, Emmanuel
174* O little town of Bethlehem

Psalm Psalm 80: 1–8, 18–20 [A1B]

10* All my hope on God is founded
695* God of mercy, God of grace
614* Great shepherd of your people, hear
305 O Breath of life, come sweeping through us

2nd Reading Romans 1: 1–7

524* May the grace of Christ our Saviour
508 Peace to you

The Gospel Matthew 1: 18–25

250* All hail the power of Jesu's name
148* As Joseph was a—walking
152* Come and join the celebration
119* Come, thou long—expected Jesus
462 For Mary, mother of our Lord
159* Good Christians all, rejoice
160* Hark! the herald—angels sing
92* How sweet the name of Jesus sounds
94* In the name of Jesus
99* Jesus, the name high over all
133* Long ago, prophets knew
168* Lord, you were rich beyond all splendour
102* Name of all majesty
135* O come, O come, Emmanuel
174* O little town of Bethlehem
175 Of the Father's heart begotten
472 Sing we of the blessed mother
139 The angel Gabriel from heaven came
117* To the name of our salvation
186 What Adam's disobedience cost

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