

Matthew 1:18-25

God in your Family

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The Congregational Church of Needham

O Come O Come Emmanuel. God is coming to dwell among us. Let us prepare to meet God in Bethlehem. Let us get up like those shepherds long ago, and look for God. Come Lord Jesus ; be among us, and help us to see you dwelling here on earth. Help us to see you in our midst in this holy season.

This December- our worship theme is incarnation. The word “incarnation” means God in the flesh. The series of sermons on incarnation has addressed the question of where we find God. Do we find God in world events? Is there evidence for God’s presence in international movements like the Arab Spring? Do we see God among the poor? Is it helpful to think about the life of Mother Theresa whose faith evolved to a place where she believed that she had found God’s face in people who were dying in Calcutta? Today, we raise the question of whether we can see God’s face in our families.

At the first sermon in this series, Heike ended her message with the following story. A little boy was afraid of the dark. Every night he dreaded the time when his parents put him to bed, because he knew that he would be left in the room alone with the light out. Each night after the bedtime story, one of his parents would turn out the lights and leave his room but invariably, the little boy would cry out, and beg his parents to stay. One night his father was a man of faith so he said to the child, Don’t worry, God will be with you.” The boy thought for a moment and then he said, I know that you say that but I need a God with skin on.”

That story is in the first paragraph of the introduction to Anne Robertson’s book- God With Skin On. Where is God when nice people get sick, really sick? Where is God when innocent people die? Where is God when you really need to find the Holy One?

Anne Robertson, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Bible Society believes you find God in all kinds of relationship: between parents and children, siblings, colleagues and friends, and even relationships with our pets. All relationships hold the potential to see God with skin on.

She writes: "I hope to convince you that every relationship you have with friend or foe is connected to your relationship with God. When people grow overwhelmed by the question of where is God she writes I hope that you will consider, "That perhaps God did show up at those hard times. Was there a friend who stood by you? A doctor who made heroic efforts? A church member who brought a meal? A stranger who was able to provide a cup of cold water when your thirst was great...those people were God showing up, God in the flesh, God with skin on."¹

Today I want to focus particularly on the evidence we see of God's presence in our families. We start with the story of the Holy Family. Our passage in Matthew tells of Joseph. You will remember that Joseph was betrothed to Mary, and they both were eagerly awaiting their wedding day when an angel visited Mary and announced that Mary would soon become pregnant and that the child she would bear would be God's own. Mary responded with great joy to think that God had chosen her to be the mother of a child so blessed. When she responded to God's invitation, she also told Joseph what she had witnessed and what the angel had said.

Joseph was not so sanguine. He was confused and upset. Probably he was hurt and he wondered where did this news leave him? In those days in Israel finding your fiance was pregnant was reason for prosecution, never mind divorce. So Joseph was hurt but not vindictive, and he decided to divorce Mary quietly and swallow his wounded pride, for her sake. But once that decision was made Joseph went to sleep and had his own angel visitation. In a dream Joseph heard from an angel who told

¹ Robertson, Anne, God with Skin on: Finding God's Love in Human Relationships New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2009, xi.

him that God wanted him to proceed with his marriage, take Mary for his wife, and then raise Jesus as his own son.

Joseph awoke from his dream and resolved to do what the angel advised. In some ways I like to think that God was born in Joseph that day. Not only was God born in the form of a baby in Bethlehem, but God had skin on the day Joseph said, I am prepared to take a leap of great faith as well, and lead with kindness, not wounded pride. Who knows maybe God's presence came into the world first in the faith of Mary and the trust of Joseph? I believe that the story of Christmas points to lots of evidence that God is here among us in this time and place.

But the idea that God is dwelling in our families may be a stretch. Our families are the people we are most connected to, and so they have seen us without makeup. They have seen us when things aren't pretty. They are the people we grew up with or the ones we live with now. They know our secrets. They are the people who don't need words to understand us, the ones whose emotions we have grown to anticipate, and whose reactions we can predict. They are the people who can wound us with a look or thrill us with a gesture. So when I try to say that God is in our families I run the risk of being simplistic or saccharine. I run the risk of ignoring an honest understanding of what family life entails. I don't want to do that.

But I do want to identify a quality of sacredness that I have seen all around me in this community of faith. It is not often in the easy passages of life that we become angels of mercy or even divine gifts to one another. Last Sunday at the end of the service I stood in the back of the sanctuary to listen to Soomi Lee Lowry's piano postlude. It was beautiful, but the piano music was not the only beauty in this place. I looked around the church and saw the face of God in several other places. A father-in-law up from Atlanta sitting with his daughter-in-law- a woman who has been waging a valiant fight against cancer for over four years. There was a kindness about the way his hand rested on her

shoulder that was not the least bit overbearing, but instead it was generous, as they listened to the music together.

Across the aisle, a young woman, new to our church held an infant in a front carrier. As the music lifted and sang through the air, she caressed her child, and leaned closer to her mother-in-law and put her arm around her. She and her husband and two children have moved from New York City to live with his mother and help her out as she faces more treatment for a brain tumor.

Victor Hugo wrote an epic novel – Les Miserables – which has been made into an opera that has thrilled audiences for over two decades now. The music is stunning, but the story is breathtaking too. Set in the 18th century, it tells of Jean Valjean a man confined to prison for 20 years for a small crime. Valjean escaped, but then he had to live as fugitive who was hunted. It might have been that a lesser man would have become like an animal with that backdrop for his life, but Valjean allowed love to transform him, and heal his hatred. He adopted an orphan and raised the girl as his own. All his life as he wrestled with his mistakes, and endeavored to find redemption, but it was his love for others that became his saving grace.

In the last scene of the opera Valjean prepares to die. His daughter Cosette is finally happy and she is about to be married. As he considers his sins along with his efforts to make the world a better place he sings – “God on high, hear my prayer, Take me now to thy care. Where you are, let me be, take me now, bring me home...Forgive my trespasses and take me to your glory.” With remarkable faith in the power of redemption, he shared the wisdom that has become his salvation: “ For to love someone is to see the face of God.”

Most of us grow confused about life. We grow frightened and in our anxiety we imagine that God should come in lightening bolts. Thunder should announce the entrance for Almighty God. Instead God comes in the form of a familiar hand that reaches out to hold us in the night. God comes in artwork

from a child. God comes in a word from a spouse or partner that reminds us we are heard. God comes again and again relentlessly, but not in the ways we expect. God comes to a couple- confused but hopeful. You can hear God's abundant grace in the whisper of their meeting eyes, with their lashes soaked in wonder.