

## THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Matthew 1:18-25

Jesus, Be Jesus for Us!

A group of nine year olds wrote and acted their own nativity play. The time came for the scene where Mary and Joseph attempted to get a room at the inn. The dialogue was as follows:

*Innkeeper:* Can't you see the 'No Vacancy' sign?

*Joseph:* Yes, but can't you see that my wife is expecting a baby any minute?

*Innkeeper:* Well, that's not my fault.

*Joseph:* Well it's not mine either!

Little Joseph here displayed a keen understanding of the Christmas narrative in his reply, but, at the same time, the statement wasn't completely true. The Child in Mary's womb did not belong to Joseph. He was "Immanuel," conceived by the Holy Spirit in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. But the Child was Joseph's fault, as it is ours, because the Child was born to take away the sins of the world. He was not only Immanuel, but Jesus as well.

Jesus means "He who saves." He is the Savior. Jesus does not mean teacher, example, lawgiver, peace-loving hippie, or anything else. It means Savior. Has Jesus been Jesus for you? Has He been your Savior, or has He simply been your buddy, your taskmaster, or your yes-man? Do you show up once in a while at His door when convenient, complain to Him about your problems, eat a quick meal, and get back to the rest of life. Are you here so He doesn't get angry when He tallies the amount of services you've attended and the number of dollars you've given? Have you crafted Him in the image of our age, so that He quietly accepts your every indiscretion and lifestyle choice? Is He the Jesus of the United Church of Christ commercial, who loves and accepts everyone just the way they are, never being so rude as to call someone a sinner?

Jesus is Jesus. He is the Savior from sin. That means there is such a thing as sin. That means that He thinks sin is a bad thing, since He is the Savior from it. That means that He does love people, but He does so by making them lovable, removing what separates them from His Father: sin. He is Jesus, He who saves, not He who affirms the very thing for which He died. And unless He is Jesus for you, unless He is your Savior from the sin, you do not know Jesus, you merely know some impostor put forth in His place. As C.S. Lewis observed:

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said wouldn't be a great moral teacher. He's either be a lunatic—on a level with a man who says he's a poached egg—or else he'd be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse (The Case for Christianity).

You have a Jesus. Do you marvel at that? We marvel when Julia Roberts has twins, when Dale Earnhardt Junior wins a race, or when Kohls has blue jeans at half price. Yet, you have a Jesus, and how shabbily we treat that fact. He is here every Sunday. He is Jesus in every celebration of the Lord's Supper and every Absolution. He is Immanuel in the Word and in Baptism. But who really cares?

You may claim you've never said you didn't care, but you've said it every time you have been ashamed of Him at work or in school. You've said it when you left Him out of your home life. You've said it when you deprived your children of Sunday school or regular participation in God's service. You've said it when you could miss every other week of church, but not an episode of your favorite show. You've said it every time you made sure your house and car were spotless, but left His house to someone else's care. You've said it when you decided His teachings needed to conform to your lifestyle. You've said it when you pontificated on what the church should do

while a new layer of dust grew on your Bible. You've said it when the simple fact that Jesus is here, arms extended, heart open, mouth filled with comfort, was not enough, because you needed something more to make the service interesting. You've said it plenty. We've all too often been like Joseph, ready to quietly remove ourselves from God's plan when it seems inconvenient or inopportune. Will we be like Joseph, accepting the Lord's correction and responding in faith-wrought obedience?

Your Jesus is in His mother's womb today. It is not Joseph's doing, but is his fault, as well as Mary's. She is the ambassador for us sinners in this whole affair. She gives God humanity and carries this holy vessel in her unworthy womb. She sings in the *Magnificat*, which we sang in our Advent Vespers, "*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.*" She carries her own Savior from sin in her womb. God our Savior is conceived in her, and, even more, He is dependent on her to survive. His little hands, formed to be pierced for our transgressions, slowly develop. His little side, from which water and blood would flow, lengthens with every day. His knowing eyes, which would one day look down with compassion on His grieving mother, are now closed in peaceful waiting. Why? Why would He through whom the world was created and holds together become so fragile, so helpless, so unimpressive? The angel declares, "*You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.*"

Luther writes:

Once upon a time the devil attended Mass in a church where it was customary in either the Lord's Prayer or in the creed to sing: *Et homo factus est*, that is, "God's Son has become a human being." While they were singing this, the people just remained standing and did not kneel down. The devil was so incensed, that he slammed his fist into one man's mouth, saying, You boorish bum, aren't you ashamed to just stand there like a post and refuse to kneel for joy? If God had become OUR brother, as He did become YOUR brother, our joy would be so great that we wouldn't know what to do with ourselves. (*Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, v. 5, p. 134).

May we never tire of this truth, that Immanuel is in the Virgin's womb, that He is Immanuel still at the font, on the altar, and in the pulpit. Yes, He may appear unimpressive at times, but only to those who don't look with eyes of faith. Jesus became your brother. Jesus became Jesus for you. Clean out your ears, because, if that name Jesus does not leap in them as St. John the Baptist leapt in the womb, something is definitely wrong. He is Jesus, our Lord, who became our Servant.

I think St. Paul can end this sermon better than I can:

*Now let your attitude be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross. Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Jesus, sweet Jesus, who will be Jesus for us if You will not. Be Jesus for us, Immanuel, God with us to save us. Be Jesus for us today and at the hour of our death, that we may come to dwell with You, as You have come to dwell with us. Amen.