

New Rules for Engagement

4 – Re-Establishing Trust

Isaiah 7:10-16

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Matthew 1:18-25

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Fourth Sunday of Advent

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Old as it seems, Christmas announces something new, God's entrance into our world, unlike anything that had happened before or since. "A virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, "God is with us."ⁱ Christmas tells us God is engaging with us directly, up close and personal. Christmas tells us a mystery surrounds our time-and-space-bound world, and invades it, and transforms it and us. In the beginning, God. And God became human flesh. Not to make us innocent, like Adam and Eve before the Fall, but to make us real. The infinite became finite. The immense became tiny. The almighty and eternal became weak, contingent, helpless, and dependent - a little baby. God made Jesus like us in order to make us like he is. Christmas changes all the rules for engagement.

Over these Advent Sundays, we have been looking at ways God comes to us to help us re-establish trust. In these days when so many of the institutions we trusted let us down, government, banks, businesses, the stock market, even religion and the church, in these days we have been listening to a Voice that says, "Let me show you how to re-establish trust." Here is where you can reliably place your trust. W.H. Auden writes in his "Christmas Oration – For the Time Being" about the depth of our dilemma.

"We who must die demand a miracle.
How could the Eternal do a temporal act,
The Infinite become a finite fact?
Nothing can save us that is possible:
We who must die demand a miracle."ⁱⁱ

At Christmas God comes as that miracle. Not because we demand it, but because God simply chooses to give it. God unfolds his miracle to a young carpenter named Joseph at a moment Joseph feels a tremendous let-down, a great throbbing disappointment because he discovers his intended wife is pregnant, and he knows he is not the father. Mary and Joseph were not living together.

Joseph is a good man, an honorable man, a devout religious man, a man who knows the rules and plays by them. As he perceives it, Mary has broken the rules, big rules of fidelity, she has violated his trust, and he cannot imagine going through with this marriage, being a good man, a righteous man. And being such a good and righteous man, he will not make a public embarrassment for Mary. He will not put her to shame, knowing that in culture she could very well be stoned to death for doing what he thinks she has done. So Joseph will "dismiss her quietly."

As he is in this state of consternation, God sends Joseph a message through his angel in a dream telling him of a new way of engagement. A new way of engagement with his intended wife Mary, a new way of engagement with the world about him and the God above him. It is an incredible way, a fantastic way, a mysterious way. It is a way that changes all the old rules.

Engagement here should be understood both as a noun and as a verb. As a noun engagement is a state of relationship between a young couple about to complete their preparation for marriage. The rules for engagement then were different from those of today. Engagement then was not just a preparatory time filled with showers and parties and presents. Engagement was already a legally binding time. Although the marriage was not consummated, there were no sexual relations during the engagement, couples did not live together, yet they were considered legally married during this time. Thus is established an important point in this unique birth – how Joseph is legally the father of Jesus, and yet Jesus is “the Messiah, the son of David, the Son of Abraham, the Son of God.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Engagement, more importantly, should also be understood as a verb. The act of engaging. That is what we are in such need of, authentically engaging with God, with our families and friends, our church and community. Too often such active engagement is a distant formality rather than an intimate reality. So good to see Christmas is the gateway for us to engage under new rules of grace. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. From his fullness we have these all received grace upon grace.”^{iv}

Different rules apply in different situations. This came to me in a fresh way last Saturday as I was watching the Army-Navy game being played from the stadium of the Philadelphia Eagles. I was especially interested in this traditional match-up between the academies because the Army sophomore quarterback is a young man named Trent Steelman who lived down the street from us in Bowling Green, KY, and played in our house and yard. His older brother Tyler was a close friend and football team mate of our sons Peter and Stuart. The point was made during that game, (and condolences to Army,) as the ball was being placed on a hash mark after a play, that there were two sets of hash marks on that field because the Philadelphia Eagles’ professional team has different hash marks from college game hash marks. Something I had forgotten. New rules for engagement.

Matthew’s Gospel wants us to appreciate these new rules which emerged from the old rules. Matthew’s Gospel has the most emphasis on the Old Testament Jewish promises being fulfilled in Jesus. “What has been spoken by the Lord,” is repeated 12 times in Matthew and then Old Testament prophecy is quoted. Like here, the connection between Isaiah 7:14, referring originally to a birth to a young woman in a situation over 500 years earlier, and seen by the gospel writer to be referring now to Mary and Jesus.

Joseph is being challenged to play by new rules for engagement different from the old rules he had grown up with, the traditional ways and moves of his culture, the way God had been understood as relating to his people in the past. Here are three of these new rules.

I

The first new rule for engagement is this: **“Do not fear.”** Christmas is about the end of fear. “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”^v The angel announces something never before imagined, God coming to be with us in his son, miraculously conceived to deliver us from all fear. The things we have feared in the past; being perceived as a failure in the eyes of the community, being let down by someone we love, being taken advantage of, we no longer need to fear these. Sickness, financial hardship, oppressive government, relational difficulties, “Do not fear.”

We no longer need to fear even God as an angry deity. Now, there is a proper sense of fear of God that is the beginning of wisdom, better termed “awe”, and that, is a sense we need desperately to recover in our I-pod, interactive, facebook world. We have tended to trivialize God, call him “the man upstairs,” treat him as window dressing for self-absorbed, self-focused lives, make him so much less than the awesome God the Bible shows us God is. Recover awe, and have no fear.

At Christmas God’s true nature bursts forth as the one who is worthy of all our praise and worship, the Creator of the stars who comes among us in a cattle stall. At Christmas God shows us how greatly he loves us, how far God will go for us in giving up his own privileges and attributes in order to authentically engage with us. “Thou didst leave thy throne and thy kingly crown when thou camest to earth for me.”

At Christmas God does not wait for us to get to him, to prove he exists, to give him a room to stay in when it is convenient. God chooses to invade our world. God takes the initiative and comes to us. “God comes to us in person – in the person of Jesus Christ. Christmas means the mystery that meets us at the heart and boundary of life is who we know it to be in Jesus Christ – personal, faithful, full of compassion and abounding in steadfast love.”^{vi} Therefore, this new rule, the first new rule for engagement, **“Do not fear.”**

II

The Second new rule for engagement is this: **Trust God’s promises to come to you and forgive your sins.** God is about to do something incredible through this birth. “A virgin shall conceive and bear a son.” The virgin birth has been called a guard at the door to protect the mystery, prevent us from seeing Jesus as just another prophet. Jesus is unique, human and divine together. The virgin birth expresses this. The virgin birth is not a material necessity, God could enter this world any way God chose. The virgin birth is a theological necessity, a sign pointing to an explanation of this great wonder that God was fully in Christ.

“Mary will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”^{vii} No mere man could do that. Only God can forgive sin. That is divine work. Yet only because God has reduced himself to tinyhood, as a helpless infant who grows to be a real flesh-and-blood man, can we humans from our side grasp this forgiving work of God. If God had stayed in his heaven and shouted at us from there we would have been overwhelmed and undone, by the intensity, as when we look directly into the blazing sun with our naked eye. But in Jesus, God reduced himself to our capacity to receive. God promises Joseph he will undertake an amazing deliverance in this child Joseph is told to name “Jesus.”

Reinhold Niebuhr was the great American theologian who stressed Christian Realism; not frothy idealism, but the reality of human sinfulness, and the reality of divine grace. Some years ago, when Time magazine listed the 100 most significant Americans of the 20th Century, people like Albert Einstein, John D. Rockefeller, Alexander Graham Bell and Franklin D. Roosevelt - Reinhold Niebuhr was the only faith leader named among the group. Niebuhr said, late in his life,

“I have come to realize that it is possible to look at the human situation without illusion and without despair, only from the standpoint of the Christ-revelation... I have come to know... that only in the ‘simplicity of the gospel’ is it possible to measure the full ‘dignity’ and ‘misery’ of human beings.”^{viii}

The second new rule for engagement is to trust God’s promises to come to forgive your sins in Jesus Christ.

III

The third new rule for engagement is this: Trust he truly is **Emmanuel**. The word means “God is with us.” It is a word Isaiah spoke in a distant time at least 500 years before Jesus was born. God had certainly been Emmanuel to his people Israel, but in a limited and hidden sense. Now in Jesus, God is Emmanuel for Israel and his people and all over the world who are every skin color and speak every language and are at every economic, educational and social level. The Psalmist cries, “Stir up your might, and come to save us. Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.”^{ix} In Jesus, God has done precisely that, shown us his face, reached us and given us a new way to engage with God – intimately, personally, authentically. Now in Jesus, God is with us, shining his face on in whatever we pass through, giving us grace to endure.

In one of those “family letters” that sometimes accompany our Christmas Cards, you know the list of what everyone has been up to in the last year, we received one last week from my former associate pastor colleague in Bowling Green, Marnie Crumpler, now a Pastor at Atlanta’s Peachtree Presbyterian Church, that was particularly touching. Marnie wrote,

“Let’s start with February. Coming off a great holiday season last year and a January birthday trip with son John to a Wake Forest basketball game, we found our backs to the mat when our daughter Anna went into respiratory failure and

spent a week at Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta. The details of how all of that happened can’t be told in a letter – but it came quick and it came on harsh. Anna was on a respirator for a couple of days but she responded well to treatment and a week later we went home. We felt the incredible love and support of our own family and our Peachtree Church family. She’s done very well since then, as if it never happened.

We came away from that realizing how quickly life can change, gaining a fresh awareness that too many families spend far too much time in hospitals with their children, thankful for the gift of health and life. We were up, we went down hard, and we bounced back quickly.”

God sends Jesus because we live in this kind of hard up and down world. When Joseph awakens from his dream he is a transformed man. He is a man who resolves to play by God’s new rules for engagement. He lines up on the new hash marks! He decides to take the risk. Defying convention, he takes Mary as his wife. He serves as provider and protector to his and the Father’s Son Jesus, and thus enables these new rules of engagement of God as gracious, forgiving, loving, saving, to reach even us here today. The seed of God is implanted by the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary, and thanks to Joseph’s renewed trust, that seed grows to its intended fullness at just the right time. That seed grows, as the Apostle Paul says in Galatians 4 in his only reference to the birth of Jesus, “When the fullness of time had come, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.”^x

Joseph makes the decision to engage - with God, with Mary, with Herod, with a harsh, brutal world.

Engagement – not acquiescence. Connection is a given; it’s part of the ecosystem for everyone on earth. Engagement is a choice. The family will be gathering for many of us this Christmas. We are connected to them by blood. But will we engage with them by choice? We have a choice whether to engage authentically and honestly, being real, instead of just being nice! This Christmas, the real God, the authentic God, the all powerful God, the intimate God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God with us, Emmanuel here, now, always, invites you – engage with me! Engage!

ⁱ Matthew 1:23.

ⁱⁱ W.H. Auden, “For the Time Being – A Christmas Oratorio” in Religious Drama 1 p. 17

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 1:1.

^{iv} John 1:14, 16

^v Matthew 1:20.

^{vi} John Rogers, The Birth of God, p.8.

^{vii} Matthew 1:21.

^{viii} Reinhold Niebuhr, quoted by Ted Loder in The Haunt of Grace, p. 157.

^{ix} Psalm 80:2-3.

^x Galatians 4:4-5.