

The December CFAMC Devotional Page

First, a confession: I am sort of a “Christmas contrarian.” I resist getting in step with “the season” – which is one of the reasons you’re getting this on December 28th, not the 24th. There are lots of other reasons, but one is pressing itself on me today very strongly (the things you overhear, on the streets of San Francisco): ever notice that most people, after a few days MAXIMUM of feeling cuddly with a certain Person they like to THINK is just a helpless little baby, after a few days of giving lip service to family and community and sharing and giving, revert the day after Christmas to the same behavior as before (like their behavior on the 24th, if you dare to get between these people and what they are trying to buy)? Ever notice how church folks that pack the pews and choir lofts by the dozens on the Sunday nearest Christmas (Christmas itself, this year) seem to go back into hibernation until Easter? To these folks, inside and outside of the church, Dec. 25 makes no lasting impression!

This year I sat down and I worked it out: there is a “holiday” with the patterns thereof, and then there is the experience of IMMANUEL. I detest the December pattern because it seems to have so little to do with Him. For me, the whole thought of “God with us” is enough to make it hard for me to keep my seat even right now, enough to overwhelm me any time I stop to really think on it. To me, you might take all the Christmas trappings, the food, the trees, all the secular music and art, and that part of the church service that consists of dealing with people thinking they’re just going to give God their thrice-yearly nod (the other two days being Easter and Mother’s Day – and all those choir members who haven’t rehearsed SINCE Mother’s Day!), and wrap them up together ... you would find I would pass over that “present” without looking back because of the precious weight of glory in that one Name... IMMANUEL, “God with us.”

Taking the Christmas issues per se, it just amazes me to think for our sake the Alpha and Omega would contract Himself to fit into something that probably looked more like these rough-looking items than the those mangers in those nativity scenes we have already put away...

Wooden Troughs, courtesy of Szilas and Wikimedia Commons (public domain)



Philippians 2:5-7

⁵Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus:

⁶Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God:

⁷But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men:

Think about it. Everything belongs to Him; He did not have to come into such abject poverty that a wooden trough was the best He could do for a place to first lay His holy head – and consider that it would only get worse! In adulthood He would say that “The Son of Man hath nowhere to lay His head”! The most glorious took on the form of the most inglorious; the Master took on the form of a servant, God took on the form of man – and a very poor one at that! But remember: He was not done working with wood. As a carpenter He would have made many such troughs as the above; as God He formed the seed that would grow the tree that would become the old rugged cross. Paul Kiler has in his cross collection an item that contracts the whole story of Christmas to a beautiful span:

Christmas Cross by Mel Rivera, photograph courtesy of Paul Kiler



As Paul is often educating us, a lot of time and devotion goes into telling a story visually (there are hints to the Savior's entire earthly ministry in it, but I leave you to find those), so it is worth examining, thinking about, and expecting to learn what God may have to teach through works of art intended to convey a sacred lesson. One thing I particularly notice about this image is that much of it is engraved in goldtone on a background of red. Gold for royalty, of course... red for the infinitely precious blood the King of Kings

would shed. For it was not just that God chose to tour the earth in human form, as the mythical Greek and Roman gods did. It was that He, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the sum of all perfection and goodness and righteousness, had come to humble Himself even to the most humiliating death known to man, a death reserved to conquered peoples and the worst of criminals – traitors and murderers and thieves – among them! The death of the cross, and all that it entailed!

Isaiah 53:1-9

¹Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the LORD revealed?

²For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him.

³He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

⁴Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.

⁵But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

⁶All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

⁷He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.

⁸He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken.

⁹And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.

Side note: When Isaiah wrote that, he was talking about his people, the Jews, who at least had the advantage of knowing the prophecies about Who they were waiting on – and thus had the opportunity, as many did, to recognize Him when He came! But, we Gentile folk ... we need to understand where all our ancestors were relative to the promises of God before Christ came. There ain't no cute, cuddly, shiny, pretty things in this tale:

Ephesians 2:11-13

¹¹Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands;

¹²That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world:

¹³But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ.

Read it until it sinks in, folks... “having no hope, and without God in the world.” No matter what ancient Gentile heritages we may be proud of, no matter how we vie to have those cultures given their due, Ephesians 2:12 is God’s opinion of them. Without Christ, we Gentiles would have nothing to show for our ENTIRE EXISTENCE, since God sovereignly chose the seed of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to be His chosen people and left our ancestors in Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, and North and South America quite out of it. Truly we Gentiles can sing, “Jesus sought me when a stranger...” for if He had not come looking for us, we Gentiles would not have known enough to go looking for Him. For that reason, we owe EXTRA thanks, worship, and praise that God chose to – after thousands of years of choosing NOT – to save us and then dwell among us, in Christ!

Okay, back to the main drag – Whether Jew or Gentile, the fact is that we are all wretched sinners – by nature, and by choice as soon as we were old enough to choose to oppose our will against God’s will. Why should God, the Omnipotent, choose to put up for even a moment with our puny rebellion? Why should He choose the death of the cross to redeem such worthless people? The answer – and the story of Christmas, and the meaning of “Immanuel” is only grasped to the extent that we understood that Immanuel is also Love, Himself, the Almighty, All-Present, All-Knowing, and for those in Christ, All-Forgiving God, Who gave up Heaven and the prerogatives of never knowing the shade of pain and death to live 33 years on a cursed earth in a limited, finite, pain-subject human body and die a humiliating, cruel death – for you and for me, so that we would not have to pay the eternal cost we so roundly deserved for our sins!

John 3:16 – For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Now that covers just what was accomplished in the Incarnation. That would be enough. But wait, there’s more!

Isaiah 53:10-12

¹⁰Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.

¹¹He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.

¹²Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

Philippians 2:9-11

⁹Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name:

¹⁰That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth;

¹¹And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

That's the reward the Lord Jesus gets for His work. Now, here are some things in the least-quoted Christmas passage in the Bible (by the way, Mel Rivera, the creator of the Christmas Cross above, probably knows this passage well; notice the form of a dove in the image) that in our day-to-day it is so easy to overlook.

John 1:14-18

¹⁴And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

¹⁵John bare witness of him, and cried, saying, "This was he of whom I spake, He that cometh after me is preferred before me: for he was before me."

¹⁶**And of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace.**

¹⁷For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.

¹⁸No man hath seen God at any time, the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.

It is not that the Lord Jesus is going to enjoy His incredible rewards from His Father all by Himself, for He has chosen otherwise. It is not even that someday we shall share in all those rewards, though indeed we shall. It is not just that He saves us from our sins and lets the matter go there, although that would have been enough reason to praise Him as

long as we draw breath. Reread John 1:16... that, and all that comes around it, is ours NOW, because He is ours now.

Put another way:

Hebrews 13:8 – Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever.

Immanuel – God with us – the same yesterday, and today, and forever. Of course, that is the whole point of verse 5 of the same chapter:

Hebrews 13:5 -- Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for He hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.

Think about it... everything we have and don't have pales next to the one Name: IMMANUEL. I have learned this fact during times of loss so painful that I marvel that I have been able to endure and triumph in so many ways, and have so much joy – I have so much joy! Yet not I – IMMANUEL! Down the hours of grief, loneliness, and of persevering through situations that I felt would choke the life out of me, my Lord has chosen to school me in the meaning of His Name, every day...

Psalm 94:17-19

¹⁷Unless the LORD had been my help, my soul had almost dwelt in silence.

¹⁸When I said, My foot slippeth; thy mercy, O LORD, held me up.

¹⁹In the multitude of my thoughts within me thy comforts delight my soul.

He is so faithful, so true, so forgiving, so powerful, and so present – with me, when my broken heart had no one else to turn to, with me, when I had reached my wit's end, with me, when my body knew pain that was severe enough so that I thought that I might die – with me, guiding in the day-to-day that can just grind a person down without there needing to be anything “wrong” – with me, when to triumph ALONE would have been a tragedy greater than a defeat because of no one to share the joy with. IMMANUEL – every second, every minute, every hour, every day – when He is known and felt as such, how is it possible to participate in behavior patterns (we all slip up, but I'm talking about PATTERNS) that deny such a reality?

This is why I am sort of a “Christmas contrarian” – why you'll not find me running with the crowd that is rushing around in worship-like pursuit of particular ITEMS, why as a businessperson you'll not catch me marketing for the “Christmas rush,” why any Christmas “stuff” that puts the “X” in Christ's place drives me to distraction, why you'll find me at “whosoever will” church services that are only attended by folks that think the Lord is worth an evening or an extra day of their time for collective praise and worship,

and why I will feel absolutely no need to participate in any “post-holiday blues.” My heart is overwhelmed with IMMANUEL... and I commend to you, in the coming New Year, the benefits of getting to know all that He means, with us, in the forever unfolding before us with each new day!