

First Sunday after Christmas
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
29 December 2024

John 1:1-18

Here we are on the Sunday between Christmas and Epiphany, and for many, this has been a low-energy Sunday. After all the energy spent preparing for Christmas and the birth of Christ, the countless hours shopping, the house cleaning, the parties, the tree decorating, the airport runs to pick up or drop off family members, and all the cooking, there is a sense of let- down, and exhaustion the week following Christmas.

Contributing to this sense of letdown is the fact that we don't know much about the life of Jesus until he is 30 years old, with the exception of the brief episode when he was 12 years old, which we will read next week. We simply don't know much about this Jesus of Nazareth. In fact, every culture seems to picture Jesus in a way that best suits that particular culture. But the truth is that we don't really know what Jesus looked like, who he was as he was growing up, if he went to school or not. We don't know if he was popular and friendly, if he read the Jewish Scriptures, or what exactly he did with his dad at the shop.

We infer from scripture that he was a carpenter, but not once did Jesus refer to himself as a carpenter. We simply don't know much about Jesus until he begins his early ministry at the age of 30. This lack of knowing concerned so many people in the early centuries of the Church that by the fourth century there were a variety of infancy stories about Jesus that circulated openly throughout the known world. There is a particular narrative called, "the Infancy Gospel of Matthew" where the animals around the stable at the time of Jesus birth speak openly about Jesus to other animals. "In the Infancy Gospel of Thomas (c. 140–170) Jesus makes clay birds and then sets them to flight, he curses a bully in a playground who dies instantly, but then the boy Jesus raises him back up from the dead (Christ the Lord, written by Anne Rice, 2005 uses this account to speak of the infancy of Jesus). In other accounts, Jesus's diaper heals people, and his sweat cures leprosy. In another account, he planted a church in England in his mother's honor when he and Joseph of Arimathea sailed there, when he was just 12 years old. In other accounts he studied in India, Persia, or Tibet between the ages of 12 and 30 years of age.

I am glad that the early church rejected these stories and chose to follow the leads of the canonical Gospels when it came to the infancy narratives of Jesus. They were willing to acknowledge that Jesus spent 90% of his life in obscurity and quietness. I find this revolutionary and attractive. Jesus did not write any books,

did not seek notoriety, did not do great signs and wonders when he was a child, did not draw any attention to himself, but rather. he prepared himself in quietness and confidence for the coming of his mission to the world. He simply lived his life in anonymity until his time came. This is revolutionary for us today, in an age where we seek to be known, to be recognized, to be remembered, and to be famous from a very early age. Although Jesus' early life was a mystery to the world, it was not a mystery to God. God was with the boy Jesus as he grew up, as he engaged in his everyday life, and as he was a son and a brother and a friend. God was with the boy Jesus in the good times and in the bad times, when the world made sense and when it appeared confusing and cruel. When he lived a quiet existence and in his public ministry. When in the eyes of the world he was a nobody, and when he was hailed by crowds and adored by thousands. Finally, God was with Jesus at his passion and at his resurrection.

And I say that this is reassuring because most of us lead a quiet existence. We are not famous, rather, we are the type of people the world will forget sooner or later. The irony of this communications age is that we are no more memorable today than most people were during Jesus' time. We are here today and gone tomorrow and with the exception of a few people nobody will even miss us. After a few short years nobody will remember us. But the Good news is that God sees us, God knows us, our lives are not a mystery to God, in the same way that Jesus' first 30 years of life were not a mystery to God. At the Resurrection Christ became the true Emmanuel, the God with us. He walks with us as we lead our quiet lives, as we engage in the everyday struggles of our existence, as we look for meaning and for purpose in our jobs, our relationships, our affiliations, and our hobbies. He is with us as we worry about our children, as we fuss about our husbands and wives, as we grieve the loss of family and friends, and as we struggle with financial matters or health issues. He is with us as we deal with pain and regret, as we confront our inability to forgive, and as we try to recover from our addictions. He sees us and he loves us in spite of who we are, or precisely because of who we are. So, today, when we are feeling that sense of letdown after the highs of Christmas, and as we are feeling exhausted, let us remind ourselves that Emmanuel is among us in the routine of our everyday lives. He will never leave us.

As we close another year, let us celebrate the many blessings God has given us this 2024. God has been for us and in us, and through us he has blessed many people in Dominican Republic, at Eisland Elementary, at NAM, Hope Center Houston, Lord of the Streets, and other places. God has been with us around our Diocese and in our own community. God has been faithful to us as we have sought to be faithful through our worship, our prayer life together, our social action, and

our engagement with our Diocese and Church. This has been a year of blessings as we welcomed a number of people into our congregation through baptism, and as we celebrated dozens of sacramental rites and special services. This was also a year of sadness as we said goodbye to some of our dearest parishioners. Through it all, however, God has been faithful and has allowed us to grow in numbers, in faith, and in budget size. I believe the best years for this congregation are still ahead of us! We know that our future depends on God in Jesus Christ our Savior, by the power of the Holy Spirit. As long as we remain faithful to the truths of the Gospel, our congregation will continue to grow spiritually and numerically.

Today, just a few days after the birth of Emmanuel, I want us to rejoice in the fact that God is with us and that we will never be alone in this world as long as we are willing to acknowledge his presence among us. He is here, he is with us, and he will guide us to the end. The scene of Christmas is not only a past event, but also a present and future reality. Our Lord has come, our Lord is here, and our Lord will come again. Our faith is rooted in this belief. And this is the source of our hope and our joy.

Let us pray,

Dear God, our lives are in your loving hands. We thank you for all the blessings you have given us in 2024, and we ask you to continue to bless us in 2025. May we increase in our faith in your loving care and in our commitment to your Kingdom. May we never fall into despair or doubt your love for us. Bless our church with the gifts of financial provision and growth. Bless those we baptize today and those who cannot be here because of illness or travel. Continue to make us into a people worthy of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior.

Amen!