

First Friends Church, a Quaker Meeting  
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett  
December 13, 2020  
Emmanuel or Immanuel?  
Isaiah 40: 1-2

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Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

Message

I needed to solve an argument; is it I/Emmanuel with an I or with an E? The answer is both. Immanuel with an "I" is a transliteration of the Hebrew word composed of (with us) and El (God). Emmanuel with an "E" is a transliteration of the Greek. Some argue one reflects the great mystery and glory of God and the other the Divine revealed in human flesh- God was for us before God was with us.<sup>1</sup>

This reminded me of a cartoon. A child sitting on "Santa's" lap asks, "Is Jesus like God or the same as God?" Santa responds, "What?!" The child quips "Well you're not the real St. Nicholas!" You might ask, "What is funny about this cartoon?" Well the story goes that in 325 AD a Bishop literally punched out Arius at the Council of Nicaea over this question about Jesus' divinity. It was not a shining moment for the Bishop. But because of his generosity to children the Bishop did go on to become St. Nicholas. So the real Santa or St. Nick certainly could have answered the child's question. This highlights another Christological argument. Was Jesus a Divine Savior whose purpose

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<sup>1</sup> <https://preceptaustin.wordpress.com/2013/03/06/immanuel-emmanuel-god-with-us/#:~:text=IMMANUEL%2C%20EMMANUEL%20%28GOD%20WITH%20US%29%20The%20answer%20is,of%20the%20few%20translations%20that%20maintains%20this%20distinction%2C>

was atonement or a spiritually enlightened man who revolutionized religion and human kind?

Another dichotomy I experienced was two images of the “holy family.” One was traditional; Mary looking beatific, every hair in place, holding the peacefully sleeping Jesus while Joseph stands regally looking on. The second was Mary in exhausted sleep in the background, while Joseph tries to care for a newborn. Which image brings comfort and peace? Which one is “real” to our sensibilities?

There are many arguments the church and the world have had and that are going on. We’d like to say they are much more important than splitting of hairs in spelling, ancient doctrinal and Christological conundrums, or a more comforting or real image of the family. But are they?

Around us people are experiencing depression, despair, and hopelessness. Like the ancient Israelites and our ancestors we are captive; to our own anxieties, expectations, and busy-ness. We allow things to isolate and exile us physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually from God, each other, from ourselves, and from beloved community. There is of course the virus. As covid rages and hospitals fill, health care workers plead for everyone to please stay home, wear masks, social distance, and take care of ourselves and others. Yet people complain about inconveniences and rail against or even resist restrictions. But I wonder if some people have come to use it as an excuse. Much more damaging are the attitudes, politics, and ideologies. The I or the E.

I read a story about a ghost who untied a donkey that then destroyed a garden. The farmer who lost his garden blamed the owner and took retribution. The neighbor got

mad and got his vengeance. The anger and damage escalated back and forth. The two forgot about the ghost who set the donkey free to begin with. The author of the story explained that the ghost is like the irresponsible media and social media that start the false narratives, the hyperbole and lies, but which we- the farmer and owner- continue to circulate and escalate into drama and damage far beyond any reasonableness or rational purpose.<sup>2</sup> We play Nicholas and Arius.

Another example was presented to me in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade on Monday in the story of Fox and Cat. Fox bragged and sneered at Cat that Fox had many options to escape danger, while Cat had only one- hiding. But just then a pack of dogs came upon them. Cat hid but Fox couldn't decide which of many options to take. The story ended well for Cat, but not so much for the braggart Fox. Second grade is a brilliant place to learn that bragging or sneering is not behavior that is rewarded. If only the media, social media and some of us read more 2<sup>nd</sup> grade stories!

But I also realized this story has a Quaker and Process Theology message. God is constantly luring us toward God; the Source and fulfillment of harmony, peace, generosity, compassion, and beauty. Out of the many choices we are offered in life the highest and best choice is the one that simply and in a straightforward manner realizes wholeness in Life-giving Love. The Cat lived simply and with integrity. Hiding worked for Cat's best and highest good- he survived and didn't need to worry about dreaming up some grand scheme. If the Fox had listened to the Cat and hid, instead of scheming, well things would have turned out a whole lot more loving, harmonious, peaceful and whole for the Fox.

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<sup>2</sup> With apologies to Ranjan Solomon

The hymn O Come Emmanuel is a prayer of yearning and longing for something the ancient Israelites sought, and the church has sung and renewed it since the 12<sup>th</sup> century. "O Come Emmanuel and ransom us from captivity; who mourn in exile until you come to save us from tyranny and bring us peace." The hymn Comfort Now My People is more recent and is a hymn of encouragement. "Comfort now my people; tell of peace!" Comfort those who sit in darkness mourning under sorrow's load. To God's people now proclaim that God's pardon waits for them. Tell them that their war is over God will reign in peace forever!"

What these hymns only hint at is a deep truth; we are and have always been free to choose a simple, straightforward and loving life. God set us free from the beginning of time. Learning to live and be free is a different thing altogether. It requires focus and not getting caught up in the arguments, the drama, and the schemes. If God wants us to comfort and be comforted, what place do we play in the action?

Maybe we can start with simple actions that turn things around. Waking in the middle of the night to send an email to a friend- I miss working with you in person. Sending a note of courage and appreciation to hospital staff. A call just because. A prayer for someone we have no relationship with to experience peace. Notes to people we haven't seen in worship for a while. Extending an invitation to worship, or to the Advent evenings to a neighbor, family or friend. Smiling kindly even if we don't want to, to people who are not kind, so they are confronted by kindness and love and have something positive to stew about.

I know I also need to work harder at keeping my days simple and straightforward; turn off the noise and dial down the drama. None of the Is, Es, conundrums,

discussions, arguments or schemes is as important as the vision I have been given of the Divine; the Source of never-ending, overflowing Life-giving Love and Peace. I ask myself, "Self, why would you not want to spend more time with God?!" That is a conundrum I need to solve.

O Come O come Emmanuel and Immanuel, empower us to ransom ourselves; to cheer and comfort each other's spirits in isolation, to save from oppression and make safe earth for all, to leave behind all envy, strife and quarrels, as we become one in heart and mind living in heaven's peace.