

Looking into the Lectionary

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 21, 2025

Matthew 1:18-25

Views on Christmas throughout the years

Looking at the large tree and the holly and ivy in our sanctuary, it's hard to believe that we are relatively new to the celebration of Christmas.

Some 400 years ago, our English Puritan forebears had grave misgivings about all things yule. Voicing the Puritan unease towards holiday frivolity and merriment, William Burton, a minister in Bristol, England, wrote in *Certain Questions and Answers, concerning the knowledge of God...*: "This time is appointed to the church to have the birth and nativity of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ kept in a holy, joyful and thankful remembrance; and not to be spent as though hell were broken loose in all manner of licentiousness." I take that to mean Burton wouldn't care much for the light display on Main Street.

An observance of Jesus 'birth, Burton continued, "must be done in the fear of God, to the maintaining of holy love, to the relieving of the poor and needy, and to the glory and praise of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, in whom, by whom, and for whose sake, we enjoy all the blessings that we have." I take that to mean we wouldn't see Burton set down his eggnog to dash off to Target to purchase a few more stocking stuffers.

Samuel Miller, one of the founding professors at Princeton Seminary, was dead-set against religious observances of Christmas. His reasoning was simple: since Scripture is the supreme authority for faith and life and since Scripture says nothing about celebrating Christmas, Christmas should not be celebrated. Indeed, Miller wrote, the truly Primitive and Apostolical Constitution of the Church of Christ, "We believe, and teach, in our public formularies, that there is no day ... commanded to be kept holy, except the Lord's day, which is the Christian Sabbath."

Obviously, things have changed, and we have broadened our vision and expanded our views and embraced the larger ecumenical consensus regarding [Christmas](#), as well as the ever-expanding American cultural commitment to Christmas. We'll do later this month what our Presbyterian ancestors wouldn't have imagined, gathering for [worship on Christmas Eve](#) to celebrate the birth of Jesus. That's a good thing, I think. Fitting and appropriate and spiritually meaningful.

While we do well to heed our ancestors' cautions in regards to the excesses of Christmas, we have much to gain by keeping a focus on the essence of Christmas. While Scripture does not record a celebration of Jesus' birth within the life and practice of the early church, the theological significance of Christmas is at the heart of the gospel. Matthew's Christmas story in Matthew 1:18-25 lifts up two foundational pillars of our faith. Both have to do with the name of the baby.

Name him Jesus

"Call him, 'Jesus,'" the angel says to Joseph about the child in Mary's womb (Matthew 1:21). "Jesus" is the Greek form of the Hebrew name "Joshua." The name in Hebrew speaks of salvation. Call him Jesus/Joshua/Yeshua, for he will save the people from their sins. Before he even arrives, we are told what this child will be about. He will be about salvation. Name him Jesus.

Jesus is the one who saves. Burdens weigh us down and sin trips us up and stress and anxiety often seem to have the upper hand. But Jesus is the one who saves. We suffer and stumble, try and fail. Jesus is the one who saves. Our best deeds don't seem good enough; our best efforts always seem to come up short; death is relentless, claiming every one of us. Jesus is the one who saves — he saves us from our sins, saves us from ourselves, saves us from death's final word. He does what we can't do. Name him Jesus, the one who saves.

Salvation is at the center of Christmas. Why wouldn't we celebrate that?

Name him Emmanuel

There's a second name attributed to him in this passage, also drawn from his Hebrew heritage. He is one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke, one born as a sign of God's faithfulness, one whose name is Emmanuel. Again, the name means more in Hebrew, where it translates, "God is with us."

Emmanuel, the God who is with us, in all things, in all times, in all places. Emmanuel, the one we can count on, the one bringing peace in the midst of distress, hope in the midst of despair, mercy in the midst of failure.

Emmanuel, the God who is with us, in the tearful silence, in the hard choices, in the painful memories, in the shattered dream, in the valley of the shadow of death.

Emmanuel, the God who became flesh. We call it incarnation. God becoming flesh to be with us. That's Christmas, pure and simple. Why wouldn't we celebrate that?

What's the "right" way to celebrate Christmas?

Getting Christmas right is not hard. It's right there in the Bible, right there in the names of this child: Jesus. Emmanuel. The one who saves. The one who is with us.

Christmas presents us with these great truths of the gospel. Don't lose them behind all of the frivolity and the excesses, beneath the shopping and decorating, under the eggnog and the fudge. In fact, why not give yourself a Christmas present and write these names on your heart: Jesus. Emmanuel. He is the one who saves. He is the one who is with us, always.

Reflection questions on the fourth Sunday of Advent

1. Reflect on the significance of the two names for the child mentioned in this passage: Jesus and Emmanuel.
2. Amidst the excesses of Christmas in our culture, what are the moments, practices, or activities of this season that are most

meaningful for your faith? How do you balance the excesses and the essence of Christmas?

3. Matthew's Christmas story develops the character of Joseph. How have you thought about the character of Joseph over the years? What are his admirable qualities?
4. The more famous biblical birth story of Jesus is told in Luke 2:1-20. How do the birth accounts from Matthew and Luke fit together? How do they diverge? What distinctive points does each story seek to make?