

**DECEMBER 18, 2011 HOMILY  
AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH**

**Hebrews 11: 9-10, 32-40  
Matthew 1:1-25**

**“EMMANUEL----A STEP OF FAITH”**

The Dinkas are one of the tribes in the war-torn African nation of Sudan. The Dinkas love cows. And they herd cows. They don't commonly eat beef, but live off the dairy products from their cows' milk. But the Dinkas have come to have a great personal love, even affection, for cows. In fact, they're *obsessed* with their cows. They sing to the cows and imagine the cows are singing back when they moo. They caress their cows. They spend much of their time just hanging out with their cows. The children start this cow-obsession quite young. And the children will argue among themselves about which child looks the most like a cow. And to be the child who is most cow-like is a great honor! What is the center of life for the typical Dinka tribesman? His cow! (in The Blue Nile, Alan Morehead, pp. 278-279)

A cow is a strange thing to have your life centered around. But everyone has something that is the focus of their life---for some it's cars or houses or food or clothes----or cows. But there are better things to focus one's life on.

Today's epistle reading from Hebrews 11 told us about some people---the Saints of the Old Testament times----who focused their life on faith. Faith in God, faith that something wonderful was ahead, faith that God was going to do something great in the future. And so in advance gratitude for what God would do in the future, they lived in the present in deep faith in God. Their whole life was centered on their faith in God. We heard about many of them in Hebrews 11 today. Hear again verses 9-10 of our epistle lesson in Hebrews 11 that speak of one of these faith-focused people, Saint Abraham----“he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.” And in Hebrews 11 we hear about many similarly faithful people of the Old Testament----Sarah, Moses, Gideon, David, the many prophets, etc. They lived by faith, looking forward to what God would one day do. And they were so faithful to God that, as our epistle reading says, the world was not worthy of them.

Some people live for their cows. Some live for their money or houses. The folks we heard about in Hebrews 11 lived for God. They lived by faith in God, always looking forward..... But they never saw the great thing they were looking forward to take place in their earthly lifetimes. As we read in verse 39 of Hebrews 11----“And all these, though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised.” Even when they died, it was still in the future for them.

Then it happened. The great thing they were waiting for happened at the first Christmas about 2000 years ago. God came down to our world. The Creator of the world became a baby boy. A very great and good thing indeed!

The faith of the Old Testament Saints---their faith was that it *would* happen ---that God would come as a baby. Our faith, thousands of years later, is that it *did* happen---that God has come as a baby.

They waited, looking forward in faith to what *would* happen. We rejoice, looking backward to what *has* happened.

Probably the most famous play about waiting that was ever written was written in the 1940s by Samuel Beckett. It's called "Waiting For Godot". I'm sure some of you have seen it and many of you probably had to read it in high school or college literature classes. It's a very simple, strangely simple, play. No props, no fancy costumes. Just two men standing on a stage and talking to each other. No particular plot, just these two fellows standing around and talking about how they are waiting for someone else named Godot to show up. And they don't say much about Godot, either. They just wait and talk, wait and talk---waiting for Godot. And Godot never appears---so at the end of the play they just walk off the stage and it's over. And so ever since the 1940s when the play was written, people have wondered, "Who's this Godot guy?" Beckett got asked but he wouldn't say. Many think it's God. After all, knock off the last two letters from "Godot" and what do you have? So some have speculated that the play is really about mankind's waiting and waiting and waiting for God to show up. But He never does!

We actually don't have to wait for God to appear. The Old Testament Saints in Hebrews 11? Yes, they did have to wait. We don't. God already did appear---at Christmas.

That baby in the manger? That baby is God the Son, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Person of the Holy Trinity, the eternal Word of God, the Creator of everything. He became one of us at Christmas. He became a human. He became a baby. As we heard in today's gospel reading from Matthew 1 in verse 25---"Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and His name shall be called Emmanuel which means 'God with us'." In this verse St. Matthew is quoting from the book of Isaiah in the Old Testament written about 700 years earlier. Isaiah says a baby will be born to the virgin and the baby will be called "Emmanuel", Hebrew for "God with us". We know "Emmanuel" wasn't the baby's personal name---that was the name Jesus. And as for titles, the most common one is "Christ". But another title that is used for Jesus is this name, Emmanuel. And it means "God with us", because that baby actually is God with us.

That very big, very good "something" those Old Testament Saints in Hebrews 11 had been waiting for so long, even living for? It happened at Christmas. Emmanuel came; God with us.

As Christians, we take a step of faith, a very big step of faith. We believe that that baby is divine. We believe that baby is Emmanuel, God with us. And if we really take this step of faith; if we really believe the Christmas baby is Emmanuel, then it will shape our whole attitude towards life.

Think of the implications if this title Emmanuel is true. That means that the infinite, all-powerful God is so good and loves us so much that He decided to become one of us. He created our world and our human race long ago. Then 2,000 years ago He came down to us and became one of us---Emmanuel. The British poet, W. H. Auden, describes it this way---"The infinite became a finite fact." (in The Spirit of Early Christian Thought, Robert Louis Wilken, Yale University Press, 2003, p. 10) The infinite became finite, God became a baby. Emmanuel means God is with us.

A little boy was visiting his grandparents' old country farm house for Christmas. The house was big, old, and full of creaky noises when the wind blew. The first night he was there was a cold and windy night and the upstairs bedroom he had been given seemed downright creepy to him. He went downstairs and told his grandma he was afraid to be in that room alone. Grandma said, "But you're not alone in there. You know that God is everywhere." The boy responded, "Yes, I know God is everywhere, but sometimes I need a God with skin." (in Heaven Below, Grant Wacker, Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 87) Take a look at an icon of our Lord Jesus Christ and you'll see that we do have a God with skin---Jesus Christ, Emmanuel. We have a God we can see---Jesus

Christ, Emmanuel.

And so when we take that step of faith and believe in Emmanuel we know that God loves us very, very much. And no matter how hard life gets, how rough (and it can real rough, real hard), we have this one basic fact to cling to---Emmanuel, God with us. God has proven that He is good and that He loves us because He has become one of us. And so all will eventually turn out well.

And that's why Christmas is so merry. We are celebrating Emmanuel---God become a baby! Yes, it's certainly possible to get too wrapped up in all the food, the gifts, etc. But we shouldn't become Scrooges about Christmas because essentially all the celebrating is a good thing, it's all a very good party. Christmas is a party wherein we celebrate that life is ultimately good because God is so good that He became one of us.

Last Sunday, some of us from our parish went caroling at a couple of nursing homes in the area. We sang all the common carols (usually just the first verse because who knows the second, third, and fourth verses!). One, maybe not so common, that we sang was the old English carol, "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen". As we sang it I paid more attention to the words than usual. And I noticed where the comma is in the opening line. I think before I had always figured it was "God Rest You, Merry Gentlemen"—in other words, telling some merry fellows that they should have a good rest at Christmas. But the comma actually comes between "merry" and "gentlemen". So the idea of the carol is that God Himself will make the gentlemen merry. And how will God make them merry? Well, the carol goes on to tell us of the great news of Christmas---that Christ our Lord was born on Christmas Day, news of "comfort and joy". It's not us that make Christmas merry. God makes it merry by what He did---He joined us. So enjoy the birthday party that God has given us.

And may God rest you merry, gentlemen. And may God also rest you merry, ladies. There is something wonderful to be merry about---Emmanuel, God is with us. Merry Christmas!

