

## **“God with Us”**

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Text: Matthew 1:18-25

One of my favorite museums in the world is the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. It's a private collection and the story goes that a wealthy heiress grew up in Manhattan and attended Grace Episcopal Church. She got married, moved to Boston, and then she lost her young son to pneumonia before he could turn two years old. Isabella fell into a deep depression, and sickness plagued her.

When her doctor saw her, he knew that she needed something to combat the depression, and he prescribed travel. They loaded her onto a stretcher and boarded a ship to Europe and Russia. The trip not only had the desired effect of getting her out of her depression, but it changed her life. Gardner went to museums and began to collect. Then she built her own museum, in order to hold her private collection.

There is a lot written about Gardner, because she was always in the society pages. She was rather Bohemian and did things that shocked genteel Boston. But the museum always makes me wonder about her spiritual life. There's something there—a profound working out of her grief.

The collection stunned me. Not only because of its vast beauty, but also because Gardner collected religious art and has a chapel. There was something about it that was so moving. I couldn't quite figure it out. Until I realized that there were an overwhelming number of portraits of Mary and Jesus that vividly portrayed what “Immanuel” means. And I began to think about what it means to have an incarnate God, or a God who takes on human flesh. For when the angel appeared to Jacob, he explained that Jesus would be called Immanuel, which means God with us.

Jesus is not quite two-years old in many of the portraits--the same age that Isabella's son would have been when he died. And the interaction between Mother and Child was completely different from the stiff icons that I had been so used to. Typically, in many pictures of the Madonna and Child, Jesus looks like a mini man, instead of a baby. He is standing and often holding three fingers up, in a blessing on Mary. Or he is teaching her. You can see that the artist is trying to portray the divinity of Jesus.



And yet, we're missing something in those icons. The artist distorts Jesus' development as a human. I didn't even know that it was missing, until I began to walk around the Gardner museum. What I saw was stunning.

Jesus was not a tiny man in these paintings. He was actually sleeping.



Jesus was nursing.



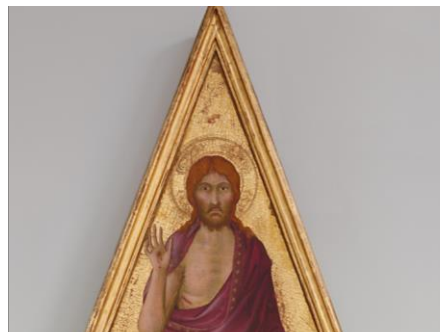
Or Jesus was moving on from breast milk and reaching out for his first solid foods—grapes and wheat.



Mary tickled Jesus' feet, while he looked up at her with delight.



There were times when Jesus comforted Mary. Holding up her chin.



And portraits where Mary looked like the peasant woman that she was.



In some portraits, Jesus was often holding a bird. There many explanations of the significance of the bird. Some said that it had to do with miracles that Jesus was said to have performed as a child. (Apocryphal works say that Jesus took mud, formed it into the shape of a bird, and they flew off!) Others said that it had some sort of symbolism tied to the plague. The birds were seen as divine messengers of healing.



But I like the third explanation that scholars present, and that was that kids had pet birds back then. And it's a portrayal of Jesus' playfulness and humanity.



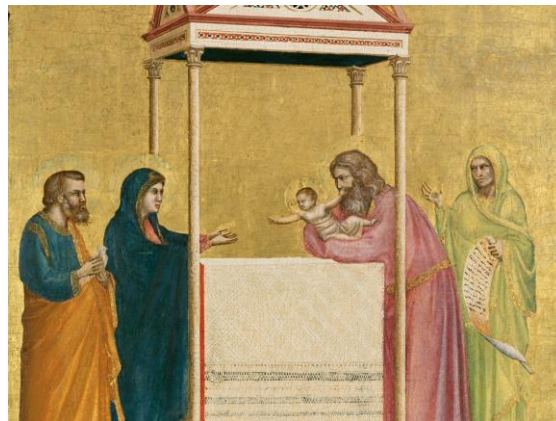
Speaking of his playfulness, Jesus is on a play date with John the Baptist in a couple of the scenes.



Perhaps the most surprising ones were Jesus, clinging to Mary in fear or confusion.



There is the blessing of Simeon, where Jesus is not really sure about the guy, and so he's reaching back for Mary.



Or, in an even more uncomfortable scene, Jesus is getting ready to be circumcised, and he squirms to get away from the knife.



Now, as your pastor, I have to note, in all of these portraits, Jesus is white, with blonde hair and blue eyes. Which is ridiculous. We all know that Jesus was from the Middle East, not from Sweden. And I could have a whole other slide show on Jesus and race. But for now, I want to stick with the incarnation. And Gardner's collection does a beautiful job of portraying that particular aspect.

For Jesus did not pop out of Mary's womb, standing on his two feet and blessing Mary and Joseph. Jesus is 100% divine, *and* Jesus is 100% human. Which means Jesus cried in hunger, needing his mother's breast. Jesus waved his hands in the air, in those disorganized movements, and Mary and Joseph had to wrap him in swaddling clothes so that his tiny, paper-thin fingernails didn't scratch his face. Jesus had to learn to walk, his voice changed, and he went through the awkwardness of puberty. Through Jesus, we have a God, who is every bit God as an "eight-pound, six-ounce newborn baby." We have a God who is utterly vulnerable.

And because of that, when we say that God is love, we do not mean a sort of idealized emotion. When we say that God is love, we mean that sort of love that wakes us up in the middle of the night and cries for comfort. We mean that sort of love that calls out to be burped and patted. We mean that exhausted love that wants to play, even though we just want to take a nap. We mean that kind of love that will fall asleep on our chest for hours. It is a love that takes on flesh and blood, that knows what it's like to immigrate for safety, or to cry at the grave of a friend. Jesus' love knows the deepest betrayals and has walked through death.

In Jesus Christ, we do not have a God who is detached and unwilling to take on the murkiness of humanity. But we have a God who is incarnate, flesh and blood. A God who understands the depth of human pain and suffering. A God who does not try to look away from hunger or oppression but became immersed in it. We worship a vulnerable God.

Perhaps that's what moved Gardner, as she chose these works. Maybe there was something in this parental love of a woman who had to watch her child die, that moved her and ultimately helped her get off that stretcher.

And, in the holiday season, when we know that people struggle with loneliness, anxiety, and depression, we also realize that we are not alone. For God is for us in creation, God is in and among us through the Holy Spirit, and God is with us in Christ's incarnation. Amen.