

“Emmanuel: God with Us”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
4th Sunday of Easter
May 3, 2020

Scripture Readings:

Isaiah 7:14

¹⁴Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

Jeremiah 29:11

¹¹For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

Joshua 1:9

⁹I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

Isaiah 41:10

¹⁰Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.



Sermon: *“Emmanuel: God with Us”*

Whenever I hear a siren or see an emergency vehicle on their way to a call, I always say the same prayer: “God, please be with them and the people they’re going to help.” There is a lot packed into those 12 words. Whether for firefighters or police on their way to protect lives or paramedics on their way to save them, it’s a prayer asking that God go with them, to keep them safe, focused, and calm. And for those they’re on their way to help; it is a prayer for God to bring comfort and healing.

I don’t remember when I started saying that prayer. But I know it grows out of the need, in times of trouble, to be reminded that God is always with us. Now that is true all the time, but we tend to not think so much about it when things are going smoothly. It’s when the road gets bumpy that we really start reaching out to God to steady ourselves. And we do it reflexively, just like when you trip on the stairs and automatically grab for a handrail. Because even if you don’t normally think about it, you know it’s there. And whether we’re aware or not, God is always here. One of the consistent themes of the Bible story, is the powerful, real presence of God in the world, always with us, no matter where, no matter what.

The history of the people of God is filled with moments of crisis. If you just open your Bible somewhere in the old Testament and plunk a finger down, there’s a good chance you’re going to land in a spot where there is some sort of crisis going on.

The story of Moses takes place against the backdrop of slavery and suffering. The entire book of Judges tells the stories of ordinary people who rose to greatness by leading Israel in times of crisis. David is known as much for his exploits as a warrior as he was for being a King. The familiar stories of Daniel in the Lion’s Den and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace are stories of faith in the midst of crisis, and they take place within the larger context of the Babylonian exile, which was itself a crisis.

Many of the Psalms are written to comfort and encourage the people of Israel. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me”¹ is a reminder of God’s presence with us in times of crisis.

In their writings, the prophets addressed the people of God in the midst of crisis. There were crises of leadership, crises involving foreign threats, crises related to the people’s willingness to turn away from God. Yet through it all, God remains constant. God is always present, strengthening, protecting, providing, no matter what. And that’s especially important for us to remember.

This Covid-19 pandemic is a crisis. And it has forced us to fundamentally change the way we live day to day. We live under a threat and must take precautions and endure limits that were unthinkable just a few months ago. And this pandemic comes with a raft of worries and fears.

We worry about getting sick and what that might mean. We worry about access to testing and limited treatments. We worry about our leaders making the right decisions and what might happen if they make the wrong ones. We need people to stay at home to limit the virus’ spread, but we also know that for many people, the need to go out to work and earn to provide for their families is a desperate one. And many people are torn between wanting to see grandkids and visit friends and just go out again, and not wanting to run the risk of becoming sick or of making others sick.

And whether our experience of this virus has put us on the front lines treating the sick, or at home struggling to teach our children, or alone in an apartment without much personal contact, or even grieving the loss of a loved one, it can be really hard just trying to survive. But while it is always true, it is especially important to remember during this time of crisis that *we are not alone. God is with us.* And God is more powerful than any crisis we face. That is part of what we celebrate in this season of Easter, as we honor the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ.

You see, around Easter we tend to think of Jesus as Messiah and Savior. We celebrate that his death and resurrection are the gateway to forgiveness and eternal life; that because of what God did through him, we are given new life. The problem is we pay so much attention to what he does, that we forget the importance of who he is.

When Matthew tells the story of Jesus' birth, he quotes the prophet Isaiah. "The virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel..." And we remember that the name Emmanuel means "God with us." Paul emphasizes this in his letter to the Colossians when he writes that "In [Jesus], the fullness of God was pleased to dwell."² God didn't just send an emissary. God came in the flesh. That's who Jesus is. Jesus isn't a relative, or a friend, or an employee of God. Jesus *is* God.

Jesus. Emmanuel. God with us. Not God over us, beyond us, out of reach. God *with* us. God chose to shed the trappings of divinity, to embrace the weakness and vulnerability of being human. And because God lived as one of us, God knows what it is to be one of us. In Jesus, God experienced first-hand, the joys of childhood, the awkwardness of puberty, the stress of expectations and of failing to meet expectations. In Jesus, God experienced hunger and loneliness and the grief of loss. In Jesus, God experienced true happiness and laughter, and God cried real tears and shed real blood. We can trust that whatever we face in this life, God understands and commiserates with us because in Jesus, God has experienced it too.

Now you might be thinking "Hey wait, Jesus never accidentally deleted his hard drive or got fired from a job or went through a difficult divorce." Well maybe not. But none of us experiences the exact same things that others do, at least not in the same way. That's part of being human. But we can still relate to one another because we are bound together by this human experience that we share. You may have never deleted your hard drive, but as a human being, I'm sure you've made an irreversible error that made you feel sick to your stomach. And you may never have been fired or gone through a divorce, but at some point, you've felt the pain of rejection and failure. So, when someone shares those things with you, you can empathize, and comfort them and be with them in that place because on some level, you've shared at least a part of their experience.

And in Jesus Christ, so has God. So, when we are afraid. God knows what that feels like. And when we worry, God can share our concerns. And when we feel lost and alone and uncertain, God commiserates with us and can meet us where we are. And no matter what we may face, whether the fear of sickness, or the pain of loneliness, or the uncertainty of the future, God will face those things with us. And no matter what we feel, whether it is anxiety of the unknown, the grief of loss, or the frustration of feeling like we're not good enough today, we know that God has experienced those emotions too and is present with us in them.

God is divine, and eternal and beyond our ability to comprehend. But in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, God let go the trappings of divinity and took on flesh and lived as one of us. Because of that shared humanity, we know that God goes with us through whatever we experience, and that God endures with us whatever struggles we endure. And we can be confident that no matter where our journey takes us, whether through the valley of the shadow of death, or the check-out line at Kroger, or an emergency room, God goes with us.

So today I pray for us, as I do for our first responders, and I invite you to do the same: "God be with us." And I say that prayer not as hope or wish, but in the strongest confidence that God already is.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Psalm 23:4, KJV

² Colossians 1:19, NRSV