

“Emmanuel”

Matthew 1:18-25

Christmas Eve Service

December 24, 2020

Pastor Andy Kinsey

**“And they shall name him Emmanuel,
which means God is with us.”**

- Matthew 1:23

Prayer of Preparation

Almighty and gracious God, come to us, and abide with us; may we receive your Holy Spirit and so rejoice at the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray: Amen!

Christmas Eve Message

In his little book, *Portraits of God*, Harold T. Bryson tells the story about a group of boys who asked their minister for a service project where they could help somebody. The minister gave them the name of a man who was blind, and who wanted someone to read the Bible to him.

When the boys arrived at the man’s house, they agreed that, over time, they would read the entire New Testament to him.

However, when they started reading the first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, they quickly came to all the “begets” and begats.” Abraham begat Isaac, and Isaac begat Jacob, and Jacob begat Judah – and so on.

When they looked down the pages and realized that there were 17 verses of “begets” and “begats” they decided that they would just skip over the section and get on to the “good stuff” about Jesus’ birth.

The old man, however, said “No,” asking them to please read every word of the “begets.” The boys did, and they noticed that the old man began crying as they ran through the long list of genealogies. He continued to cry until they were through.

Finally, one of the boys said, “Sir, why are you so emotional about a list of names?”

And I like what the man said. He said, “Well, boys, God knowed everyone of those fellers, and God knowed them by name. And it makes me feel real good that maybe God knows me too, and that maybe he knows me by name!”¹

The Good News of Christmas

The Good News of the Gospel and especially the Good News of Christmas is just that – God knows you very well! And more that: God loves you deeply and dearly. God knows you by name!

That is the glorious message of Christmas, and it is in line with what we read a moment ago in the Gospel of Matthew: “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet Isaiah – ”Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be ‘Emmanuel,’ which means God is with us” (Matthew 1: 22-23).

That’s Christmas! On Christmas Eve, we celebrate the birth our Lord Jesus Christ, the One whose name, in addition to Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace – is Emmanuel or God with us.²

A name that speaks to a God who, instead of keeping his distance, comes close, very close, in Jesus Christ, and thereby comes close to us!

Charles Wesley, the prolific hymn writer of Methodism rose to his greatest height of creativity in expressing this message when he wrote these words:

Christ, by highest heaven adored, Christ, the everlasting Lord:
Long-desired, beyond him come, Finding here his humble home.
Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see, Hail the Incarnate Deity!
Pleased as men with men to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel.

Hark the herald angels sing! Glory to the newborn King!

Instead of keeping at a distance, God has come to dwell with us in the form of a baby – the Word made flesh in Jesus (John 1:5).

God With Us

¹ Thanks to Maxie Dunnam for this illustration in his sermon “Emmanuel – God With Us” (Matthew 1:18-25) at www.esermons.com.

² For the sermons on the Names of the Messiah by Pastor Andy Kinsey and Pastor Jenothy Irvine, go to www.franklingrace.org.

Indeed, I cannot help but think that the message of *God with us* is one of the most urgent messages we need to hear, in what has been a strange and difficult year, to say the least. On multiple levels, we could not have predicted a year ago what we would experience in 2020!

As we will share in a moment in song, when we celebrate Holy Communion, *a weary world rejoices* tonight, and by weary, I do not just mean tired. Rather, I mean “fatigue,” a kind of mental, spiritual, and emotional exhaustion, during what is now the most deadly year in American history.

In fact, I am sure that, over time, we will look back on this year and shake our heads. Others will look back with sorrow. Who could have foreseen the magnitude of suffering, confusion?

The daily reports of the rise of positive cases of the coronavirus, the number of deaths now taking place in parts of the country and around the world, the conflict over how to handle the pandemic – all echo a “dis-ease” in our souls and expose, at times, distances between us, not just physical, but personal.

For example, I cannot help but think of the images of distance between loved-ones during this pandemic, as when we have not been able to touch or hug our loved-ones. We have felt the distance.

Or, as when a friend or a family member may have contracted the virus and we could not be there in the hospital. There is an aching in our hearts.

Or, as with the many who are now working at home and at a distance from others; who would have thought that we would speak a new vocabulary with words like Zoom, Google Hang Out, Live Stream, WebPlex, and on and on. We have had to find new ways to connect, even though we are at a distance, including this service of worship tonight!

Or, how do we come to terms with the growing distance we see between us as Americans: we seem to be moving farther and farther apart from one another, on just about everything.

And at this moment in our history, not since the Great Depression, have we seen food-lines, and car-lines, and hunger to be what they are.

God With Us?

A year to remember? I know I cannot fully speak for Pastor Jenothy and others, but I feel I can safely say we have not experienced anything like this in our lifetimes. I know I did not learn in seminary how to lead a church through a pandemic. I certainly did not know anything about social media or the internet.

Yes, I grew up during the 60's and 70's with all the cultural "stuff." I went through the Gulf War, 9/11, the Iraq-Afghanistan Wars, the Great Recession, along with all the other "ups and downs" of life, but a pandemic, on top of social and political unrest, on top of economic uncertainty?!

To be sure, I am certain that in some capacity, we all have experienced such disruptions in our lives: loss, hurt, separation, loneliness. We all have had to wrestle with basic questions of how we keep hope alive, and of how we keep the faith, trusting in God no matter what. Not to mention how we contend with the age-old questions of suffering and pain! God's goodness. God's faithfulness. Human sinfulness. Justice. Public health.

It reminds me of the remark C.S. Lewis once made about pain and suffering. Lewis wrote that "pain and suffering are God's megaphone to wake us up, to get our attention."³

Indeed, if that is the case, it makes me wonder why so many of us seem to be so deaf to God's wakeup call! Like with so many other things in our lives, we seem divided even in our response to God, with some folks asserting themselves and their "rights" over the welfare of others, while others are seeking God and turning to God, having to contend with God's ultimate purposes.⁴

Again, this is not new. We know from the Scriptures, and from history, the inclination in us all to turn to or turn away from God. It is as if we have a *Big Me* and a *Little Me* inside us. The *Little Me* always wants to tell the *Big Me* what to do, to go off course (Romans 7:15:20). It is a classical Jacob-Moment, when we wrestle with God (Genesis 32:22-32).

What is new for us, I feel, is how we are not left helpless: we *can* respond to God, even during these times; we can continue to turn to God and receive God's grace; we can continue to share the Good News with others, and we can continue to meet our challenges and rise the occasion.

³ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1996), 24.

⁴ See Sonia Shah's book *Pandemic: Tracking Contagions, from Cholera to Coronaviruses and Beyond* (New York, NY: Picador Press, 2016).

After all, if Christmas means anything, anything at all, especially at this moment, it means recognizing that, even in the most distant of places, like Bethlehem, among some of the most unlikely people, like Mary and Joseph, lowly Shepherds, or Magi from afar – God is up to good! God is with us! God has not left us. God is about giving, about saving and redeeming. God is about healing and forgiving!

And what Christmas is about is receiving this goodness, this great gift of God's grace, making room in our lives for God's presence, no matter where we are, no matter who we are. No matter the distance between us, reminding us yet again that God so dearly loves us, that God knows each one of us by name! All because of God's Name: Emmanuel!

Merry Christmas!