

Where God Is
1st Sunday of Advent
November 30, 2008
Isaiah 64:1-9, Mark 13:24-37, 1 Cor. 1:4-9

And now, it's Christmas. Actually, it's been Christmas in the stores since a couple weeks before Thanksgiving. Does it seem to anybody else like it gets earlier and earlier every year?!? We were out contributing to the economic recovery on Friday, and of course, it's *really* Christmas at the Mall. Not only the decorations – all red and green and gold, sparkly and bright – but especially the music. The Christmas season is defined by its music perhaps more than any other season of the year. Not *only* in the church, but *especially* in the church. We are hosting the Brandywiner's Chorale on Wednesday evening, December 10. A free concert for all to enjoy. And I hope you will make it a priority to join us on Sunday afternoon, December 14 (two weeks from today!) for a special musical presentation by all of our musicians: *The Gift*. And think about whom you might invite to these special musical events. After all, everybody loves the sounds of the season.

We begin a new season in the church calendar today – and you can tell by the music. Not Christmas just yet, but Advent. For me, it simply cannot be Advent unless we sing “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” Let me tell you a bit about this classic hymn. The text was written in Latin in the 12th century and the melody is adapted from plainsong or chant – the earliest form of singing in the church. Only three of the original seven verses of the hymn are included in our hymnal. The original verses were based upon seven ancient texts called ‘antiphons’ – short prayers – which were developed for use during the last seven days of Advent. Each of these prayers – and so, each verse of the hymn – was based upon a title for Jesus from the Scriptures. For me, it is the classic Advent hymn.

Advent begins four Sundays before Christmas. It is not so much a season of *celebration*; it is meant to be a season of *preparation*. And of course, it *is* a season of preparation for us. Many of you are well into the preparations already. But by preparation I do not mean baking, shopping, and decorating for Christmas. ‘Advent’ comes from the Latin *adventus*, which means ‘shop till you drop.’ Not really. ‘Advent’ simply means ‘coming.’ Not the coming of Santa or the coming of the UPS truck or even the coming of your in-laws for the holidays or your kids home from college. Advent is a season to prepare for the coming of Jesus. Not only His first coming as a baby in Bethlehem, but also His second coming, at the end of all time as we know it. It is the Messiah's second coming that is the focus of the Scripture readings for the first two Sundays of Advent. Mark describes that coming in [13:24-37](#). He's coming – so watch! He's coming – wait for Him. I want to speak with you today about this God who comes: Jesus, Emmanuel.

The gospel of Matthew is clear that the miraculous pregnancy of Mary marked a fulfillment of words spoken by the prophet Isaiah, hundreds of years earlier: [Matt. 1:23](#): “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel.” And just in case those to whom Matthew was writing didn't understand Hebrew, he translates: “which means, “God with us.”” That is the literal translation of the Hebrew *Immanu-el*: With us, God. God is with us.

From beginning to end, the Bible tells the story of God's deep desire to dwell with His people, in spite of their unfaithfulness, their disobedience, their sin, their lack of trust in Him.

God said to the patriarch, Jacob: "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go..." (Gen. 28:15) When Moses says to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?" God says to Moses: "I will be with you." (Exodus 3:11-12) God said to Joshua, as he prepares to take over the leadership of the people of Israel: "I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you...Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go." (Joshua 1:5, 9) God said to His people through Isaiah, the prophet: "Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God..." (Isaiah 41:10)

If God would promise to be with Jacob the liar and cheater, Moses the murderer, and the people of Israel who consistently disobeyed and abandoned Him, surely He will keep His promise to be with us. But what does that mean? What does it mean that Jesus is Emmanuel? What does it mean that God is with us? Well, it doesn't mean that life will be easy and effortless. It doesn't mean we'll never face a struggle. Isaiah 43:2: God says: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze." The assumption is that you *will* pass through waters and rivers – oh, maybe not *literal* rivers, but rivers of despair or fear that will threaten to sweep over you, sweep you away. You *will* walk through flames – maybe not *literal* fire, but flames of anger or bitterness, financial ruin, that will burn and threaten to destroy you. Jesus Himself said to His followers: "In this world you *will* have trouble." Not you *might* have trouble, not some of you will have trouble. "In this world you *will* have trouble." But He goes on: "But take heart! I have overcome the world."

How does Jesus overcome the trouble that happens to us? He is with us in the trouble; He is with us in the fire; He is with us in the fear; He is with us in the pain, the loneliness, the hopelessness. And somehow, His presence *in the midst* of trouble – His presence *in the midst* of the water and the fire – transforms the trouble, the tragedy, the pain, the suffering, the fear. By His Spirit, He is with us. *He is*. And where the Spirit of the Lord is, Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, there is freedom. (2 Cor. 3:17)

"O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel..." Israel, the very people of God, had been slaves in Egypt for 400 years. When Jerusalem was conquered, they spent another 70 years in exile in Babylon. They knew what it was to be slaves, held captive in a foreign land and culture. To mourn in lonely exile, to long for the freedom to work and to worship, watching and waiting for the coming of the Messiah who would set them free. Now *we* are the people of God, and we, too, need to be ransomed, set free from *our* captivity. Today the people of God are still slaves: slaves to sin, slaves to our insatiable desire for more and better, slaves to a worldview that is godless and a culture that elevates self above all else. So maybe more than anything else, "God with us" means freedom. Jesus brings freedom. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." (2 Cor. 3:17) Freedom from the need for more. Freedom from need for the approval of people. Freedom from the fear of death and disease. Freedom from the bitterness of regret and the poison of unforgiveness, the despair of the 'what ifs' and the 'if only's.' Freedom from worry and anxiety. Freedom from loneliness and meaninglessness. Freedom from the need to

control – or think you control – everything in your life and maybe even the lives of those around you.

What do you need to be set free from this season? There are many different ways you might answer that question today. But I think fear is one of the biggest slave-drivers that holds us captive. It is no coincidence that, very often in the Scripture, we find this combination: “Do not be afraid, for I am with you.” Fear can be paralyzing. Fear can stop us from doing what is right and even make us do what we know is wrong. What are you afraid of today? Maybe you are afraid to trust God, afraid to say you believe in God because you are afraid of what He will require of you. Maybe you are afraid to take a stand for what is right in your workplace or school because you are afraid that people won’t like you or will make fun of you. We are afraid of being rejected by people, so we do whatever it takes to fit in. We are afraid of a bad diagnosis, so we don’t go to the doctor. We are afraid of a difficult confrontation, so we don’t say what needs to be said. We are afraid of being abandoned, so we allow the abuse to continue. We are afraid to give money to help others, fearing we won’t have enough to buy what we want for ourselves. We are afraid of change because it is so unknown, so we continue in that which is familiar, even though it is painful or purposeless.

Isaiah 64:4: “Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides You, who acts on behalf of those who wait for Him.” I don’t know about you, but I *hate* to wait. “Wait for Him.” The Hebrew suggests earnest expectation and confident hope. God acts on behalf of those who wait confidently and expectantly, trusting that He *will* come. But we don’t like to wait. Advent is a season of waiting: waiting for God to come, to act, to reveal Himself, to reveal His will for us. Waiting. We did a lot of waiting on Friday at the Mall. I don’t like to wait. But there is a difference between just waiting your turn, waiting in line, and waiting expectantly, watching to see, confidently expecting that God will act, that God will direct and guide, that God will protect, that God will provide. There is a difference between waiting for the pain to end, just enduring the difficulty, and waiting and watching, *knowing* that God will come, *knowing* that God is here, somewhere, somehow, whether you can see Him or not.

That difference is faith. Do you have the faith to proclaim “God is with us” even in the midst of crisis? Even in the very midst of loss? Fear? Death? Devastation? Disease? Broken dreams? Disappointments? A broken heart? When you can’t see God, can you still believe and trust that God is with you? Your Bible says He is: over and over and over again. Do you believe it?

See, our problem is that often when we encounter trouble or pain or heartbreak, we think that somehow it is an indication that God has abandoned us. So when times get tough, we tend to ask “Where is God?” Many asked where God was on 9-11. Where was God when my father died? Where was God when my husband left me? Where was God when I was abused as a child? Where was God when I lost my job? Listen: Regardless of what you are going through, regardless of what happens to you, or what *has* happened to you, regardless of whether or not it *feels* like it to you, know this: God is still on the throne of heaven. God is still in control. And God IS with you. How do I know? The Bible tells me so. The question is not, “Where is God?” Here’s the question you really need to ask yourself today: “How can I see where God is?” Did

you hear me? The question is not, “Where is God?” The question is this: “How can I see where God is?” Because surely God is

God’s name is “I AM.” The very first time God reveals His name in the Scriptures, when Moses asks God to tell him His name, this is what God says: “I AM.” God is. God is the eternal ‘is.’ God IS with us. Not just ‘will be’ with us in the future. Not just ‘was with’ us back in the day. IS with us. IS with *you*. Now. In the midst of whatever you are going through: God *is*. Not just God is, as in God exists. God is *with*. And not just God is with the good people, God is with the holy people, God is with anybody other than you. God is with *you*.

So why do we have to invite Him to come? Why do we sing, “O come, O come, Emmanuel,” if He’s already here? God says over and over and over again: “*I will be with you.*” “*I am with you always.*” Why do we have to invite Him to come if He’s already here? It’s not that God doesn’t come unless we invite Him. It’s not that God may or may not show up, depending on how we ask, or on how we behave, or on whether or not He decides we’re worth it. The problem isn’t with God, it’s with us. We have to be intentional about inviting God’s presence, attending to God’s presence, because even though He comes, we miss Him sometimes. We miss the signs of His presence. We miss the sound of His voice. That’s why we need the season of Advent. Advent reminds us to stop, look, and listen, because God comes.

We sing “Deck the halls with boughs of holly” with more delight than “O come let us adore Him.” We watch the Grinch steal Christmas for the 30th time, but we don’t watch for the multitude of ways God comes to us each day. We listen to the call to buy more, but ignore the call to give more. We obey the call to bake more and eat more while our souls and spirits go hungry for lack of the bread of life that nourishes and the living water that refreshes which is only offered by Jesus. Where is God? Here is *where* God is. Now is *when* God is. So Jesus says, “Watch!” “Wait!” “Look, listen.”

When Jesus gave His followers their marching orders, He said this: Matt. 28:19-20: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” And He added this promise: “And surely I am with you always...”

God comes to us so that we can bring His presence to others. God comes to people through people. And God wants to come to people through you. Did you hear me? God wants to come to people through you. You as individuals and you as the church. God comes to us that we might go to others, in Jesus’ name: Emmanuel. God comes to us that we might take His comfort and His peace and His joy and His freedom to others. Jesus is Emmanuel. God is with us. For a reason: not only our own comfort, our own reassurance, our own blessing. God is with us that we – the church, the people of God, the Body of Christ – might be where God is.