

Advent 4
Year A 2022
Mt 1:18-25

Come Holy Spirit, give life to my words.

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Giver of life.

Amen.

If you were listening carefully,
you might have noticed that
the story of the first Christmas in Matthew
is quite different from Luke's version.

Matthew's description of the birth of Jesus is simply:
"...until she had borne a son..."

Wow.

Seems a little underwhelming don't you think?

If most of us were asked
to tell the story of the first Christmas
our rendition would likely contain
elements from both Matthew and Luke.

Joseph's dream where the angel gives him the name Jesus;
the inn with no room;
the baby in the manger;
the wise men;
the couple with their newborn fleeing the wrath of Herod.

Today, I want to call attention to one
of the differences between the two stories.

I want to spend some time
with a focus of Matthew's story
of the birth of Jesus,
Emmanuel – "God with us."

One would think that
"God with us" is a positive,
a hopeful and perhaps soothing image.

But "God with us" is not always good news.

It depends on who you think God is.

It depends on how you think God is active in the world.

It depends on who you need God to be.

For those of us inclined to
believe that Emmanuel is good news,
I presume that we might have
a more favorable portrait of God in mind.

For the most part, when God shows up,
justice is done, righteousness abounds, and love reigns.

We believe that God is going about God's work,
which, of course,
corresponds to who we imagine God to be.

We might not always be knowledgeable
as to God's goings-on,
but we trust that God is
engaged in doing positive things
for the betterment of our lives and our world.

But, on the other hand,
for those of us who might respond
to the promise of God's presence
in our midst with mixed feelings,
God might not be viewed as favorably.

We might be content with
keeping God at a distance.

We might prefer instead to
invite God into our lives
when the timing is better,
when the time is right.

We visualize God as meting out justice,
but perhaps,
with judgment and disapproval directed specifically at us.

I know that I can float between those two images.

At a given time, I might welcome
the image of God at work evening out the playing field.

Taking down the corrupt and unjust
and smoothing the way for those
who rarely enjoy a moment of peace and security.

And yet, at other times,
I'd rather not envision
God paying attention to me
and all of the ways that I feel
I haven't quite lived up to my potential.

"God with us" can be a bit of a mixed bag for some of us.

I think if I'm honest,
those of us who fall more soundly
in one camp or the other
could benefit from knowing the perspective of the other.

Those of us happy to have God around
might profit from remembering that
this is *God* we are talking about.

And sometimes, God is not our bestie,
but has some hard truths to tell,
truths we would rather not hear
but need to know.

Those of us reluctant to have God near by,
perhaps even afraid of God's presence,
might remember that God's truth-telling
comes from a place of love and relationship.

God does not always come to us
from a place of frustration, anger, or disapproval,
but simply because God needs to be near
and yet we have chosen to keep God at bay.

In the words of commentator Karoline Lewis:

*"God with us" is fundamentally
the fullest confession of the both/and of God.*

God became incarnate.

*God, in Jesus, is never one or the other,
but miraculously, mysteriously both God and human.*

"God with us" is the foundational truth-telling of the Gospel.

*Not just the truth about God,
but also the truth about how we should share the good news.*

Are we able to let go of our insecurities,
our inhibitions, our fear or shyness,
and share the good news of
the babe who came into the world
in order that we could understand that God is with us?

How that truth gets heard
might change depending on where we are,
but its truth never changes because of who God is.

I would be remiss if I did not remind us that
the prospect of “God is with us”
resounds with comfort and joy,
but only to some of us.

But this is where we have the opportunity,
the obligation to come alongside those
whose worlds are turned upside down
and serve as the image of God with us.

This is also where we have the opportunity,
the obligation to make known to the power brokers
God’s desire for all creation.

We have the opportunity to be the embodiment
of God with us in our time and place.

How might we be the embodiment of God with us
as we battle with endemic homelessness in our city?

How might we be the embodiment of God with us
for those who will go hungry
during the celebration of the birth of Jesus?

How might we be the embodiment of God with us
as we continue to work to overcome
the scourge of hatred and violence aimed at LGBTQ+ individuals?

How might we be the embodiment of God with us
as we work to change the devastating tidal wave of climate change?

How might we be the embodiment of God with us
for those who experience the devastation of racial hatred?

How might we be the embodiment of God with us to eliminate gun
violence?

I could go on for quite some while.

Instead, I will again share the words of Karoline Lewis:

*“God with us” is God’s very own homiletic.
God tells the truth about God’s self
— I am here — as an expression of love and relationship.*

My brothers and sisters in Christ:

It is up to us to embody God’s expression of love and relationship with
those who do not know Emmanuel.