

Dec 24 **God's Not Finished!**

Luke 2: 1-10

When we think about or talk about God we tend to use big words to express big ideas. Omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, are a few words theologians have coined to talk about God. We also use words like creator, redeemer, and eternal in the heavens. And then we come here tonight to proclaim a really outrageous notion. This big, all-encompassing God that is greater than our biggest words, more awesome than our most expansive thoughts came to earth to be among us. That is a mind boggling idea in and of itself and then to add to it that God entered the world as a baby and even more, was born in a stable, why it is really shocking! We are so use to the story and the visions of children in bathrobes playing the parts of shepherds and kings, and tinsel haloed angels flooding our minds that when we hear it read, as it was tonight, we forget what an awesome and outrageous idea it is. We come holding an equally audacious idea and it is that God is still among us and God's not finished with the work started in Bethlehem and we have a part to play in God's plan! Let us unpack the glory and the challenge of this night.

We hear in Matthew that the Messiah will be called Emmanuel, which means God with us. There is a hymn whose words go like this: *Emmanuel, Emmanuel, his name is called Emmanuel. God with us, revealed in us, his name is called Emmanuel.*

The Christmas story is about God entering our lives through ordinary events and ordinary people. Innkeepers, shepherds, a carpenter and his wife are symbols of people just like us. Stables, animals, birth are all part of the everyday happenings of life of that time. Emmanuel, God with us, still happens in the common ordinary stuff of life. God is at work and God is present today and every day.

Let me share a story told by a pastor about a Christmas Eve service. The family was sitting in their accustomed place three rows from the front. He could see the lines of pain around the mother's eyes. Why? They had had a falling out with their daughter earlier in the year. Hurtful things had been said on both sides and as she stomped out the door she had said, "I don't want to talk with you ever again." She had been good to

her word. For seven months there had been no communication. Email had been ignored. Cell phone messages had been blocked. Now as the family, minus one, gathered for the holidays the pain of separation was etched clearly on the mother's face. As they were singing the first carol, the pastor noticed movement at the back of the church. Looking up he saw the estranged daughter standing there. Hesitantly she was looking for her parents. The head usher, a friend of the family and aware of what had happened, grabbed her arm and almost dragged her down the aisle. He was afraid she would change her mind and leave. As she got to the pew where the family was standing and singing the pastor held his breath. The mother looked over, saw her daughter, burst into tears, opened her arms and her daughter fell into them crying as well. Most of the congregation saw this drama of reconciliation happening and felt the Christ among them. Christmas came to that church that night. Emmanuel.

Think of the ways you have experienced Emmanuel, God with us, in the ordinary events of life. Remember the time a friend called, just when you needed someone to talk to? Or you enter into a conversation with a waitperson or checker and something more profound happens. Or, as in the example in the story, you have had a falling out with someone and then agents of reconciliation are at work to bring healing. Christmas Eve is a time to remember and give thanks for all the ways God has been active in our lives. It is a time to celebrate the idea that these were not random happenings but God actively being involved in your life. This is also a time to, with hope, look to the future knowing God will be with us, no matter what might happen.

This concept of Emmanuel, God with us, is so important for our lives and faith because it shares how much God loves us and wants the best for us. It is also a reminder that we are never alone. But the carol also talks about Emmanuel revealed in us. For others to see and experience this gift of God among us we too have to be willing to love, share and forgive so others know they will never be alone. Usually these opportunities will not be preplanned or spectacular, but instead in the common, the ordinary events of life, just as the birth of Jesus was so unexceptional that only a few shepherds knew about it.

Here are some of the ways I have seen Emmanuel revealed. Just recently I received a lovely note from a family thanking me for the care and time I had given their parent. Some could have seen what I did as just being my job; it is what minister's do. They saw something more, they saw God's love made real for their father and wanted to say thank you. The note touched me deeply, not because they were thanking me, but because they had experienced Emmanuel in the midst of my ordinary activities. I hadn't reached out to him after the loss of his spouse with the idea that I would be making a statement. I was following the nudging of God to care and love this man who was hurting. It is more than my job, it is part of my faith for I see in Jesus' life the message that our God is a God of compassion. Think about how many times it talks about how Jesus reached out to those who were sick, who were afraid, and who felt themselves to be unredeemable sinners, with love and compassion. I was trying to be faithful to this example and another experienced God with them. Emmanuel was revealed.

Some other ways that I have seen God with us revealed in just the past few weeks. Many of you gave up some of your time at Thanksgiving to help make sure that our community dinner happened. I have received emails from people who attended or saw in the paper our activities and were touched by your sacrifice for them and the community. Recently we hosted the Sequim Community toys for children program at our church. Again, many of you took time to be elves and help parents get toys for the children. You didn't have to, but in taking the time lives were touched. Even though we provide the space for another's program again I heard, as I do every year, thank you for making your space available for this and other community needs. Your church is awesome. And for our family I hope you know that the cards, the questions, the calls asking about baby Gwen were all of you making sure God was revealed to us anew and to our son and daughter-in-law. They are celebrating their first Christmas with family and their child tomorrow. For us that celebration is a powerful reminder of Emmanuel, God with us but also revealed in all of your actions. We all are asked to live faithfully and when we do God is revealed to others through our activities.

As we close I want you to again think through the events of this night. Its message is truly outrageous. We are so use to the story we don't hear the scandal. All

this season we have been reminded of the meaning of this night by my three friends, Donkey, Cow and Lamb. But think about it. We are saying God was born as a baby. That is outrageous enough. We know how vulnerable and helpless a baby is. Then to compound the absurdity we say this baby was born in a stable to a carpenter and his wife. It makes no sense. But when you set aside the logic and allow its message of love and its challenge of service to wash over you then you experience the power of this day. It is a message to be experienced and to be lived every day.

We are here tonight because we believe that as outrageous as this story is, that baby was God, Emmanuel with us, who grew up to be a man named Jesus who shared the good news of God's love and finally sacrificially gave his life for us. The spirit of this night can and must live among us and it will only happen as we see and acknowledge how we have seen God with us and through our actions reveal the power of God to others.