

Fourth Weekend of Advent (RCL/A): "God-With-Us"
Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25
December 21-22, 2019
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

"God with us": in Hebrew, *Immanuel* – in German, "*Gott mitt uns.*" When I lived in the D.C. area an age ago, there was a pub in Georgetown whose name I forget but whose burgers and décor I remember. World War II-era posters adorned the walls, including one with the silhouette of a torpedoed vessel and the caution, "Loose lips sink ships," and another of German soldiers charging onto a battlefield with the caption, "Gott mitt uns!" It struck me then and has stayed with me since that probably every army across the globe, over all the ages, has viewed itself as righteous and imagined a divine right to victory.

"God with us" in today's Scripture from Isaiah and Matthew, though, isn't a statement about who's God present to and absent from; "God with us" is a statement about who God is. It's about God's identity not God's location. Unfortunately, ironically, religious people run the risk of being especially self-righteous and apt to claim that God is blessing and approving their every move. Who knows, maybe we clergy are the **worst** offenders? A bio of Abraham Lincoln tells the story of a White House reception celebrating a Union victory. A smiling, smug cleric approaches Mr. Lincoln and gushes, "Isn't it great that God is on our side, Mr. President?" Obviously the minister was expecting the president to agree, so imagine his surprise when the commander-in-chief instead responds, "Reverend, I'm more concerned that we're on God's side." Mr. Lincoln may not have been much of a churchgoer, but he was a man of deep faith and wisdom.

Here we are just a few days from Christmas and all of you who have been longing for Advent to recede and Christmas to arrive are being given Christmas trees in the chancel, a

4th candle lit on the Advent wreath, and even St. Matthew's Christmas Gospel. Last year on Advent IV we heard St. Luke's story about the Annunciation, Gabriel's visit to the Virgin Mary. This year we hear Matthew's description of an unnamed angel appearing to Joseph in a dream. Interesting. My hunch is that Joseph wasn't sleeping too soundly for starters, because he'd somehow learned his fiancée was pregnant and he knew he wasn't the father. Now the ball was on his side of the court and he had to decide: how to proceed?? Joseph was a man of faith, so we can be sure he'd taken his quandary to the Lord.

The whole scenario of Mary becoming pregnant without a human partner is unique, puzzling, mind-numbing, deeply concerning. In Max Lucado's *Cast of Characters: Common People in the Hands of an Uncommon God*, we find this imagined reflection on Joseph's part:

I'm unaccustomed to such strangeness, God. I'm a carpenter. I make things fit. I square off the edges. I follow the plumb line. I measure twice before I cut once. Surprises are not the friend of a builder. I like to know the plan. I like to see the plan before I begin.

But this time I'm not the builder, am I? This time I'm a tool. A hammer in your grip. A nail between your fingers. A chisel in your hands. This project is yours, not mine.¹

The heart of the message an angel brings to Joseph in Matthew's Gospel and to Mary in Luke's Gospel is essentially the same: God is fulfilling a promise and doing a brand-new thing in the upcoming birth of this Child. Yes, the mother is a virgin, but the truly **amazing** thing is that this Baby is conceived in the heart of God. This Child of promise will be called Jesus, because He will save the people from their sin. His nickname will be Emmanuel, for He will be "God with us." In other words: Mary, Joseph, you have important, essential, supporting roles to play in this drama, but the Lead Actor, the Prime Mover, is God.

In Luke's Gospel the angel Gabriel addresses Mary as "full of grace," and in Matthew's Gospel Joseph is described as "righteous":

[Mary's] husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. (Matt. 1:19)

Or in the lingo of *The Message* paraphrase:

Joseph, chagrined but noble, determined to take care of things quietly so Mary would not be disgraced.

We might hear the word "righteous" and imagine some buttoned-up, straight-laced, humorless keeper of the letter of the law, self-righteously checking off boxes in the "Thou shalt" and "Thou shalt not" columns on a spiritual tally sheet. Nope. This was a guy with a heart. To say Joseph was righteous is to say he loved God **and** loved his neighbor. The Holy Spirit inexorably drew Joseph to do the next right thing as surely as the moon draws the tides. Joseph was **faithful** and Joseph was **obedient**. We've all been asked: "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Did any of us ever answer, "obedient"? I don't think so. But that's what God wants us to be, obedient, for our sakes and for the Kingdom's sake.

The Incarnation, the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, the coming of the Son of God as a human being, certainly says, "God is on our side." God doesn't leave us in manmade darkness; God gives us holy light. God doesn't abandon us to suffer the damning, death-dealing consequences of our sins alone; God sent the Savior. God doesn't say, "You made your bed, now sleep in it!" God says, "I am strong to save."

We don't sprint ahead to Christmas immediately after Thanksgiving because the Church gives us the gift of Advent, a penitential season when we don't sing the hymn of praise and when Scripture invites us to hear John the Baptist's call to repent of our failures

in love and to prepare our hearts for the Long-Awaited One. And so in these last days of Advent we seriously and soul-searchingly ask as Mr. Lincoln did, “Are we on God’s side?”

If we **are** on God’s side, we are reflecting Christ-light on “those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death” (Luke 1:79), one way or another. If we **are** on God’s side, we are offering gentle companionship to those who struggle, hospitality to the temporarily homeless in this county and the newly arrived in this country. If we **are** on God’s side, we are increasingly sharing our bounty of material and spiritual blessings with those beyond our homes, beyond this sanctuary. Gifts of food and furniture, coats and encouragement, passionate advocacy and whole-hearted acceptance, open doors and open hearts, show that God-with-us, Immanuel, is alive and well, current reality and not ancient history, worshiped in deeds as well as in words.

The Good News is not only that God is on our side, but that when we are **not** on God’s side, as inevitably happens, too, there is forgiveness for our failures in love, for our self-centeredness, for our laser-like focus on our own suffering and our myopia when it comes to others’ pain and need.

As Christmas and the new year come, may we not only be merry, but merciful, not just ready but righteous, not just jolly but obedient. The best way for us to celebrate the birth of Christ is to allow Him to be born in us and through us, to incarnate (enflesh) Him “for all who do not know or love our Lord.”² Yet. Amen

¹ Max Lucado, *Cast of Characters: Common People in the Hands of an Uncommon God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), p. 6.

²From the Lessons & Carols’ Bidding Prayer.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham