

GOD WITH US

Christmas Eve 2023 - Matthew 1:18-25
Stonebrook Sunday AM, 12/24/23, Matt Heerema

Please find a Bible and open with me to Matthew chapter 1. Today is the last day of Advent, and the hinge point between Advent and Christmas. So I thought we'd base this morning's sermon on the first Christmas passage. Let's read the great story.

Matthew 1:18-25 (ESV)

18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. 20 But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 23 "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, **and they shall call his name Immanuel**" (which means, **God with us**). 24 When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, 25 but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

This past semester we studied and preached through the book of Exodus. In so doing, I became fascinated by God's nearness to His people. At the beginning of Exodus, God's people are trapped in slavery in Egypt, and they cry out to God for help. There's an interesting moment where God says that "I've heard the cries of my people, and I know their situation, and **I have come down** to rescue them." The book ends with God coming to dwell in the midst of his people.

And I'd like to talk about this idea of "Immanuel, God with us" this morning. This idea of God being with us is a mega-theme of the entire Bible, and it's the central message of Christmas: Jesus has come to save his people from their sins.

GOD WITH US: THE THEME OF THE BIBLE

At creation: Genesis 3 tells us that at the very beginning, God walked in the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve lived. He was there in the garden with them.

A consequence of the fall Genesis goes on to describe that as a result of Adam and Eve's disobedience against God, their sin against him, they were expelled from the garden, cut off from God's presence.

In the Law, nearness through covenant obedience In our series through Exodus, we saw how God set up a system of sacrifice so that He could once again dwell in the tabernacle in the middle of his people.

Propheisied restoration: The prophets in the Old Testament all look forward to The Day of the Lord, when he returns to visit judgement on those who reject and despise him, and restore justice and peace for all those who have faith in him.

Jesus: Immanuel, God with us: Everything changed 2000 years ago at the event we celebrate today, the entry of Jesus, God's chosen one, whose name, Jesus, MEANS savior, also called "Immanuel" God with us, who came to rescue God's people from their sin, so that they could once again be with their loving creator.

The end: At the end of the book in Revelation we see that the finale, the end, the goal of all of this is that God's dwelling is now with man. Relationship, fellowship, physical presence restored for eternity.

ISN'T GOD EVERYWHERE?

You've probably heard here and there that the Bible teaches that God is "omnipresent", that He is everywhere, and indeed He is. But if that's the case, then what is this big deal about God coming to be with us?

In Acts 17:27 we have a record of Paul saying to the pagans in Athens that "God is not far from any one of us...". So, what is the the big deal then of saying that "God is with us"? Why is that special? How is it relevant?

NEAR AND FAR

The Bible describes God as near, and far, omnipresent and transcendent, with us and separate from us, which seems confusing and contradictory. But the way that the Bible teaches us this shows us something very important, and it is important to pay attention to the detail of how God is described as near, and how he is described as far. Especially important to see is To Whom he is near, and From Whom he is far.

So let's take a look at this.

GOD IS FAR ABOVE EVERYTHING

Isaiah 57:15 (ESV) says:

15 For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.

This is just one of many verses that describe God's nearness, and "far-ness". At the same time, God high above all creation, "inhabiting eternity" (this is where we get our idea of God being "outside time", he is omni-present in time as well as space...) - He is beyond our way of being. He's in a different category, a different class - He's altogether above us.

But this verse, and many others like it say that he is simultaneously high above us, but also near to us when we need him most, when we are humble and vulnerable. He's not a distant God, He's a big God. But He is also a personal God who knows and sees you.

GOD IS FAR FROM THE WICKED

Isaiah 59:1-2 (ESV) says:

1 Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; 2 but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.

This is one of many passages that show us that we have separated ourselves from our loving creator by our sin. We see elsewhere that all of us are in this category: sinners, who have separated ourselves.

GOD IS NEAR TO THE RIGHTEOUS

Proverbs 15:29 (ESV) says:

29 The Lord is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous.

Who is it whose prayers God hears? Who is it that He is near? The righteous. Those who are right with Him and who do Right. We need to be right with God in order for him to hear our prayers, and this is how and when He is close to us.

GOD IS INSEPARABLE FROM HIS PEOPLE

When we are made righteous, we become his people. And not only does God hear the prayers of His people, but He is with them, and nothing can separate us from Him.

Psalm 139:7-10 (ESV) says:

7 Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? 8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! 9 If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, 10 even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me.

Romans 8:35; 37-39 (CSB) says:

35 Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Can affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ... 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

God is with His people through any kind of suffering. He'll never give up on them, never leave them or abandon them, and *He will rescue them...* His people have *eternal* life. Sickness, famine, persecution, and death strike us down only temporarily, but then we are with forever.

What a wonderful place to be, with your loving, all powerful, good creator for eternity. And here's the goods...

GOD IS REACHABLE BY ANYONE

Draw near to him in faith and repentance, and he will be found by you.

Some of you here don't know who this God is that I'm talking about. You're here this morning for sentimental, or traditional reasons, or maybe a friend you respect invited you and so you thought you'd come see what this is all about. But have lost sight of, or have never seen the central reason this holiday exists in the first place.

The Apostle Paul spoke to a group of such people. We find his speech in....

Acts 17:22-27 (CSB)

22 Paul stood in the middle of the Areopagus and said, "People of Athens! I see that you are extremely religious in every respect. 23 For as I was passing through and observing the objects of your worship, I even found an altar on which was inscribed, 'To an Unknown God.' Therefore, what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.

24 The God who made the world and everything in it—he is Lord of heaven and earth—does not live in shrines made by hands. 25 Neither is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives everyone life and breath and all things.

26 From one man he has made every nationality to live over the whole earth and has determined their appointed times and the boundaries of where they live. 27 He did this so that they might seek God, and perhaps they might reach out and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.

God is not far from any one of us. But some of you here this morning are far from God. How can we be near this God?

We saw that God is far from the wicked. That's the state of every human, all of us have fallen short of God's glory through our unbelief and self-centeredness.

We also saw that God is near to the righteous. Even though every one of us falls short, the good news is that any one of us can be made righteous. How? Through faith.

Romans 3:22-24 (CSB)

22 The righteousness of God is through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe, since there is no distinction. 23 For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; 24 they are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Romans 10:9 (CSB)

9 If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

When we trust Jesus Christ for salvation, when we submit our whole lives to him as Lord, following His commands and His ways, we are given righteousness as a gift, and God comes near to us. So near, in fact, that the Bible describes it as God being sealed inside of us.

Ephesians 1:13-14 (CSB)

13 In him you also were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and when you believed. 14 The Holy Spirit is the down payment of our inheritance, until the redemption of the possession, to the praise of his glory.

Why does God do this? Why does He decide to save a wicked sinner?

Love. God saves His people because He loves them. Here's the the whole picture.

Ephesians 2:1-10 (CSB)

1 And you were dead in your trespasses and sins 2 in which you previously walked according to the ways of this world, according to the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit now working in the disobedient. 3 We too all previously lived among them in our fleshly desires, carrying out the inclinations of our flesh and thoughts, and we were by nature children under wrath [just like everyone else].

4 But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love that he had for us, 5 made us alive with Christ even though we were dead in trespasses. You are saved by grace! 6 He also raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might display the immeasurable riches of his grace through his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

8 For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift—9 not from works, so that no one can boast.

10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do.

This week's advent candle is the "love candle". When we lit it we read the simple truth from John 3:16, that God showed love to the whole world by sending His only son, so that whoever would believe in Him would have eternal life.

That's the message of Christmas, and I hope that message sticks with you. I hope you find yourself among His people to whom He is near.

For those of you who are near to Jesus, let this season remind you of that great gift. If you were thinking through this sermon "man, so and so needs to hear this.." Maybe that's your prompt to deliver this message. Maybe not emailing my sermon, it'll be received better coming from someone they know and care about.

For all of us, let's pray and thank God for the good gift of His presence with us, through Jesus.