

Sermon

“Christmas All the Time!”

July 14th, 2019 ~ First Presbyterian Church

5th Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Isaiah 9:2-7 and Matthew 1:18-25

SCRIPTURE:

Isaiah 9:2-7

²The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. ³You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. ⁴For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. ⁵For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. ⁶For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. [NRSV]

Matthew 1:18-25

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. [NRSV]

OPENING PRAYER: Dear God, thank you for the wonder of the Christ child. Allow us the courage now to seek and experience the wonder of you, to be faithful in both the hearing and sharing of the good news of your love, and to hope for that

Christ-like wonder and love to fill this burdened and strife-torn world; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, we pray; and let all God's people say...Amen.

A Reminder of Christmas Time

From the songs we are singing to the prayers we are praying to everything else, I wanted this worship service to remind us of Christmas time—to remind us of that time of the year sandwiched between Thanksgiving and New Year's (when the temps are much cooler!), when we all engage in celebrating the birth of our Savior, Jesus the Christ; a time when we spend weeks being bombarded with a combination of spiritual and faith-filled messages about the coming of God in the flesh, along with consumer and marketing messages about deals and specials at our favorite stores for the perfect gifts we most likely don't even need.

And, we scurry about for several weeks fighting increasingly irritating traffic patterns and overcrowded stores, with Christmas music playing incessantly in the background everywhere we go—in the car, in the mall, on the go—Ho! Ho! Ho! and Jingle Bells and Joy to the World all wrapped up together. Christmas time can certainly be annoying to a certain degree, and it seems like just about the time we are done putting up the tree and pulling out all the boxes of decorations and wrapping paper, we blink and it's time to put it all away again.

But, if we are willing to remember, Christmas time is also a time full of joy and excitement and an energy that happens both in and out of church; for me, it's an energy that starts bubbling toward the surface sometime after Thanksgiving between Black Friday and the First Sunday of Advent. And, it keeps bubbling up and up and up within us until it spews forth on Christmas Eve night with Christmas carols and candlelight and chestnuts roasting on open fires. And, for a magical instant on that special night each year, it seems that life is grand and beautiful and joyful because we are willing to believe, or at least act like we believe, that God is coming to be with us—indeed, that God *is* with us!

Proclaiming the Incarnation

And, believing that God would come to be with *us* is a very big deal, and it's a very big reason to be joyful indeed. The fancy word for this big idea is “incarnation”—the belief and concept that Jesus *was* God in the flesh, which is a big deal for lots reasons, not least of which is because it means that God understands

what it's like to be human—just like each of us; because God experienced humanity in, and through, Jesus of Nazareth—God experienced the human condition as a baby, as a teenager, and as an adult.

At Christmas time, we proclaim the “incarnation”—that God came down, that God became flesh, that God is Emmanuel—“God with us”—and that this God who is with us is also so very, very relatable. Sure, it sounds so fancy with words like “incarnation,” but when we strip away all the formal theological language, what we're saying is that Jesus was made of all the same stuff that we are—knees and ears and hair and teeth that probably needed braces. God who could be anything, who could be anyone, chose to get born into this world just like you and me—to walk the earth in sandals that pinch because his feet grew faster than weeds during childhood, to get dust in his eyes, to scrape his knees playing games with friends. When you boil it all down, at Christmas time we say loud and clear that the God of the universe *became* a human being!

God Became One of Us

And, of all the people our Creator could have been, God chose Jesus. Yes, as the first scriptures in Matthew's gospel (that we didn't read today) attest, Jesus is a distant relative of royalty—the great, great, great grandson of King David, yet born to some nothing of a peasant girl. With an unwed teenager for a mother, Jesus' life was a scandal wayyyy before he ever got to tipping over tables in the temple.

Yes! God became human and dwelt among us ... in the most fragile, unexpected way. And, that means that God was a baby—hungry, crying, and needing his diapers changed. Then God was an adolescent with all the awkward hormones and body changes, with girls standing a foot taller than him, and with him getting excited when his first whiskers starting showing up. And, finally, God was a grown adult with all the challenges of making ends meet, living a wholesome life, living up to someone else's expectations, and dealing with any number of social dynamics and complexities of his day. Yes! God became human and dwelt among us, which means that God has not just stood on the sidelines or watched it from afar, but God has lived it and experienced it just like each of us.

God Is With Us

So, again, when you peel away all the shiny glitter of Christmas, and the flash

and dazzle of miracles in the gospels, the great good news is that there is *nowhere* God won't go to reconcile the world, even becoming someone as mundane as you and me.

As I talked about last week, life is full of both sunny days and rainy days, and the reality is that rain causes mud, and no one is exempt from getting stuck in the mud—and yet the God of the universe has rooted God's own self in the same muck and mud as us, which allows us to believe that God truly is Emmanuel, that “God is with us.” The promise of the incarnation is that if God will put God's self into a baby's body, a teenage body, an adult's body—a human body just like you and me—then there is nobody that God cannot claim and nowhere God won't go to do that.

That's why Christmas time really, truly is *full* of joy and excitement and a heightened sense of energy. That's why, at least for an instant, it seems that life is grand and beautiful and joyful because we are willing to believe, or at least act like we believe, that God is coming to be with us—indeed, that God *is* with us! But, then within a matter of days it's all gone away. We box Christmas up and pack it away until the next year.

Christmas is More Than a Season

But, why do we do that? Besides the obvious answers related to calendars, seasons, marketing strategies, and Homeowner's Associations, consider this ... God doesn't stop being with us when the decorations are taken down, or when the department stores have finished their sales, or when the Christmas songs stop getting played on the radio. God continues to be with us *all the time!* And, so maybe we should be full of joy and excitement and a heightened sense of energy all of the time, too—24/7/365!

And, that's how we got to today, to this “Christmas in July” themed worship service. Because, lately, I've been feeling an increased level of joy and excitement and energy, and I couldn't figure out why. At first, I thought it was because of the novelty of adopting my puppy, Paris, back in April. Then I thought it was because another school year ended, and summer began. But, whatever joy the start of summer brought with it has long since run out because this particular summer's hotter temps have exhausted me in ways I didn't anticipate.

Feeling the Energy of Christmas

So something else was driving this energy . . . and then I figured it out. I figured it out over the past few weeks when I've been in Session meetings and having lunch conversations and listening to people give announcements at the beginning of worship about pastoral searches and mission opportunities and more. And, I realized that I was feeling exactly like I do at Christmas time—full of joy and excitement and energy—because of all that God is doing in this place!

All around us lately have been reminders of Christmas time. All around us lately have been reminders that “God is with us.” God has been with us in our worship services together. God has been with us when we've taken meals to people. God has been with us as we've planned blood drives and homeless ministries. God has been with us while we love and serve unknown numbers of people in and around our local community each and every day. God has been with us in productive committee and Session meetings. God has been with us during weekday family tours of the ELC. God has been with us as we plan and dream and listen for God's still, small voice. God has been with us in hospital rooms and doctor's offices and family living rooms. God has been with us as we share prayers and devotionals. God has been with us here and there and everywhere, and God is already wherever we are going next (as individuals and as a congregation)! God will be with us tomorrow and next week and next month. God will be at our Rally Day in mid-August. And, God will be with us as we love and support each other through good times and bad. Because God will be where God always is—with *each of us* in our highest highs and our lowest lows and everywhere in between!

Christmas All the Time!

Because God is Emmanuel. God is with us. God is with us *now*. And, God will continue to be with us in whatever is next. So it *must* be Christmas time—not only in December, and not only in July. No! It's Christmas *all* the time! Merry Christmas and Amen!