

“ICYMI, God is with us – our BFF!”

Matthew 1: 18-25, Hebrews 1: 1-3

12/13/20

This past Sunday, our Tricity area UM churches put on a Christmas Story Caravan, telling parts of the story of Christmas at each of our churches. Our church hosted a live nativity, telling the birth of Jesus, with 4 of our church families portraying Mary & Joseph and the shepherds, and we hosted a group of farm animals provided by Friendly Farms of DeKalb. One of the animals was a sweet donkey named Nestor. Nestor was the friendliest of all the animals (that included a llama, 2 geese, 8 sheep and 4 goats). Nestor accepted all pats, and was happy to accept bits of hay from anyone. However, at the end of the evening, as our guests left, and our holy family and shepherds left, and our volunteers were cleaning up elsewhere, all of a sudden we heard loud frantic braying from the pen. Nestor was in trouble! Sharon Anderson and I ran back to the pen, and started asking Nestor what was wrong, and petting him. He settled down very quickly, and we saw no sign of harm or trouble. When I asked the animal’s handler later about Nestor’s braying when we were cleaning up, he said right away, “For sure Nestor was upset because he thought everyone had left! He gets very anxious when there are no people around. He does not want to be left alone!”

Well, there you have it! How many of us could be like Nestor, anxious and feeling alone, without our usual people around? We are not in our usual workspace with our colleagues and co-workers, not in our usual church space or going to our usual church events, not able to shop in our usual places with our friends, not able to eat at our usual restaurants, not able to work out at our gym with our classmates... We could all do some panicked braying, hoping someone will come comfort us, and make things feel better and safer!

This is not to make light of our anxiety and fear and loneliness in this pandemic! My stress and our stress and anxiety IS very real and normal for living in these circumstances. We are anxious, fearful, stressed and fatigued by our unusual circumstances, just as King Ahaz was, in the passage from Isaiah that Matthew quotes in our Gospel text for today. King Ahaz was being threatened with his country of Judah being overthrown, if he did not cooperate with a war his neighbors were starting. What was he to do? Where was God? Could he count

on God to help Judah? Would God protect his people from invaders? God speaks to him through the prophet Isaiah telling him “do not fear, God is with you, and in the time it takes for this child Immanuel (God is with us) to grow up to puberty, your neighbors will no longer threaten you, and will not have invaded you.

Matthew seizes upon the story of this child, Immanuel, as a sign from God then which was fulfilled completely in the birth and life of Jesus in Matthew’s day— Jesus was truly God-with-us, born to the virgin Mary and her husband Joseph, to incarnate and live out among us, the love and saving grace of God with us and for us in this world. Jesus is God in flesh, showing us how much God loves us and wants to bring hope and healing to us all. In his death and resurrection, Jesus shows us that there is nothing that can separate us from God’s love in this life, not our sin, not our death – God forgives us, dies our death and rises for our sake, to show us that we need never despair or doubt that we are cherished and worthwhile children of God who are invited to become disciples of Christ in God’s beloved community.

Joseph, too, was under stress, anxious about his betrothal with Mary that seemed to have gone south...what was he to do? According to his faith, he should end the engagement and Mary could be stoned, publicly, for having betrayed their vows by getting pregnant with someone else. What would God want him to do? Where was God? Why had this happened to him? Would anyone respect him again? What about Mary? Why did she do this? Would she be okay? And her baby? God speaks to Joseph through his angel, telling Joseph “do not fear, this child is from God...keep Mary as your wife, and name the child Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” Matthew writes that this was to fulfill Isaiah’s words that the virgin would conceive and give birth to a son and they will call him Immanuel, which means God-with-us. And these are but two of countless examples in the Bible where God reassures us we do not need to fear, God is with us.

God with us, the literal meaning of Immanu -el. How we long for God to be with us during this pandemic! To help us figure out how to keep our job...our house...to pay for groceries... to help us watch over kids doing school at home, while doing our office work at home...to help us care for family quarantining at home...to help us get medical care for non-covid illnesses...to help us find safe

ways to connect with others while living at home alone... How we long for God to come and be with us this Advent...

Hey, ICYMI – in case you are missing it, God is with us – our BFF – our best friend forever! God and Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, are still trying to reassure us today – DO NOT FEAR! God is with us – we have a best friend forever. If we will just open our hearts, our minds, our eyes... and look for it, we can see and feel God with us, all around us, each day.

Through prophets and angels, faithful leaders, and now through Jesus, God reminds us that God is with us to guide and comfort, lead and support us on our journey through life with all of its challenges, and especially through its tragedies. In Jesus we learn that God has put on flesh to come and experience life as one of us, the Son of God who now sits at the right hand of God in heaven. In chapter 4 of Hebrews, the author writes, Jesus has been tempted in every way that we are, even though he did not sin, He knows and can empathize with our weakness, and will offer mercy and grace to help us in our times of need. The Gospel of Matthew begins with Jesus born to be Immanuel, God with us, and ends with Jesus assuring his disciples that he “will be with us always, to the end of the age.” Throughout the Gospel, Jesus shows us how God is with us in his healing works, in his teachings of mercy and compassion, in his prayers and in his miracles, in his forgiveness offered, and death conquered. God was with us in Jesus, caring for us, and experiencing our care. “When I picture what God is like, says Rev. Adam Hamilton, “God’s character, love, mercy and grace –I see Jesus...Jesus reveals God’s heart.”

And, Jesus is still with us! In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells the disciples, as the Father has sent me, so I send you! And he breathes upon them God’s Holy Spirit. Luke records that Jesus told the disciples to await the gift of the Holy Spirit together in Jerusalem, and it comes upon them all as rushing winds and tongues of flame that empower them to witness to each other and all others in different languages about the wonders of God. God is with us still today, through his Holy Spirit, giving us courage to face and overcome our fears, love to overcome hate, grace to be merciful and forgiving, strength to bring healing and hope. This is why we CAN have nice things: even today we can find joy inside our tears through the grace and love of God. When we walk with Jesus and talk with him, he leads and

guides us in the paths of peace, our best friend forever who makes our lives more profoundly full: joy-full, grace-full, hope-full, peace-full, as we fill them with his love. And as we experience this, we are also called and moved to incarnate Jesus' spirit in us: to share the joy, grace, hope and peace as we love and care for others. You see, as we experience God with us, and embrace Jesus' love with us, it becomes part of us, and lives within us as well...and as it fills us, it spills over from us to bless still others. We incarnate the love of God, as our hands and feet share the love of God and Christ with others!

ICYMI In case you miss it – God is with us – as we send cards of love to our shut-ins! As we give prayer shawls to folks in need of comfort and healing; as we represent Jesus nativity among the animals in our community; as we share basketballs and footballs with youth at our local correctional facility; as we purchase Christmas gifts for families in need; as we provide a meal for families in need; as we offer prayers and crosses to nurses, as we deliver care packages to our teachers... WE are living reminders to others that the eternal love of God is in our hearts and in our midst! We are anointed and claimed at our baptism as children of God who will serve as Christ's representatives in our world...to be agents of healing, help, forgiveness, grace, who will resist injustice, and reject evil in this world. We promise to serve Christ, building beloved community by our prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness, that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.

I encourage you to NOT miss this! God is with us! Jesus is our best friend forever, and you can get to know him better as you walk and talk with him, pray with him, read his words in the Bible, serve others with Him, and experience Him in all these ways with your brothers and sisters in church and community. Join our prayer zoom; join our Incarnation zooms; join your neighborhood zooms and service projects; join us for Disciple study coming in January! Don't miss it! God is with us: and we are the living proof today for others so that THEY won't miss it! Let us give thanks for Jesus, our Emmanuel. We are blessed to be a blessing, for always. Amen!

Rev. Lisa E. Telomen 12/13/20

CHILDREN'S SERMON 12 13 20

Hello young people and young at heart! I'm glad to be with you today as we think about how God is with us. One of the names people use for Jesus is Immanuel, which means, literally, God-with-us.

The Christmas hymn Away in a Manger helps me think about how God is with us, and maybe it can you as well. Our lives have changed a lot in this past year with the pandemic, and we still want and need God to be with us

If you want, sing the first verse with me...It tells the story of how God came to live with us in our world in the baby Jesus

Now the second verse... this tells of our desire to have Jesus with us especially in the dark, in the night, when we can see as well and fall asleep. And he is with us always, and especially in our scariest times, as he shows us and tells us in the Bible.

Now the last verse... this reminds us that not only do WE want Jesus us with us always, but we want him to be with all children, and we all want to be with him always, in this life, and in our life after death, in heaven. We want to be with God and Jesus, for always, and that is what they promise us, in Jesus life, death and resurrection: I am with you always, Jesus says.

Let's pray: God we thank you for this Christmas song that helps us remember you are with us in Jesus, and that Jesus is with us **and** all others, in our times of need, in this life, and in our life in heaven to come. Bless us as we find helpful ways to share this good news with others! In Jesus' name, Amen.

BENEDICTION

As our benediction for today, let me share this quote from Fr. Henri Nouwen, one of our greatest Christian leaders in the past century: He writes: "God came to us because he wanted to join us on the road, to listen to our story, and to help us

realize that we are not walking in circles, but moving toward the house of peace and joy. This is the great mystery of Christmas that continues to give us comfort and consolation: we are not alone on our journey. The God of love who gave us life sent his only Son to be with us at all times and in all places, so that we never have to feel lost in our struggles, but always can trust that he walks with us. “

Let us go forth into our third week of Advent, to live into this Good News, and share it with others in real and tangible ways! God bless you..... Amen!