

“Yes, God is with us always...And God is with us in all ways.”

Fourth Sermon in the Advent Series: “Yes, And...Being Open + Making Space”

Yes, you can be open to different ideas...

and you can create space for them within what you already know.

Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 2:21; John 1:10-12 (NRSV)

Have you ever thought about how Jesus got his name?

2,000+ years ago, there weren't hundreds of books and endless websites on baby names...how to pick one and what it means, how popular it is and where it originated, etc.

This week I had some fun looking at our gospel writers to see what I could learn about Jesus name...just based on the first time they mention it in their gospel. It's interesting to see each of their perspectives. Starting in reverse order:

John, ever the poet, talks about the “Word made flesh” and before he even says the name of Jesus he talks about the power of his name, saying, *“But to all who receive him, who believe in his name, he gives power to become children of God,”* (John 1:12). We may not know Jesus' name yet at this point, but we know that something about his name is to be shared

by us...because we can become “children of God.” In other words, it's not just a name for one person...something about Jesus' name is for all of us...it enables all of us to be a child of God. I kind of think of it like a family name – a last name – because everyone shares it – “Child of God.”

In Luke's gospel, Jesus does not receive his name until 8 days after his birth when he is circumcised. Other than being born in a food trough, this is the first real sign we have that this baby, while special, still is very much human...undergoing very human rites and rituals, and sharing in a custom that all boys of that day did. Like John, Luke also reminds us that Jesus' identity is communal, not just individual.

In typical Mark fashion...Mark just gets to the point. Mark doesn't tell us a thing about how Jesus was born, he just begins his gospel by

proclaiming, “*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,*” (Mark 1:1). Mark takes for granted that we all know who Jesus is, and how he got his name is not nearly as important as the fact that he is the Son of God...the one they have all been waiting for, the one about whom John the Baptist has been prophesying. The closest Mark gets to a naming ceremony is at Jesus’ baptism, when a voice came from heaven as Jesus was raised up out of the waters saying, “*You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased,*” (Mark 1:11). If you had to pin Mark down for a name for Jesus, “Beloved” is just as good as any, as far as I’m concerned. He thought that baptismal story was important enough to tell us, and I’m glad he did. It is another story that humbles Jesus, reminds us of his humanity, and how even in his baptism, he is “with us on the journey.”

Beloved seems like it could be a middle name...one that is maybe not used often, but that’s always there...printed on the birth certificate and important documents. And you know, sometimes parents only use their kids’ middle names when the kid is in trouble – like “Jonathon Charles, get in here

right now!” Perhaps Beloved as a middle name for Jesus can remind you that even in the moments where you feel most ashamed, God is calling you by your middle name and that name is Beloved...nothing you could ever do could separate you from God’s love.

Then we get to Matthew – which is where the good stuff is – and we can really dive deep into Jesus’ name. Matthew tells us that in a dream, an angel came to Joseph and told him to name the mysterious Spirit-conceived son that he would raise and father “Jesus,” and Joseph does just that. He names the boy who is born to his fiancé Mary – Jesus. It’s his first name, the name we call him today.

In Hebrew the name is *Yeshua*, which is based on the Semitic root y-š-ʿ (Hebrew: ישׁע), meaning “to deliver; to rescue.” It’s a pretty good fit for Jesus, right? He lives up to it.

However, Matthew also quotes the prophet Isaiah, when he writes in 7:14, “*Look, the young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel*” (Isaiah 7:14; Matt. 1:23). Here Emmanuel is more of a title or a descriptor than a name as we think of it. But it is

really important. Think of titles like “Dr” or “Rev”...the title defines a professional identity, if you will...that is always there even when it’s not used...and Jesus is definitely in the profession of being “God with us”...in fact, it’s his very personhood... “Emmanuel” precedes all other names.

More than the name Jesus itself, Emmanuel, “God with us,” describes what is happening with the incarnation – with Jesus’ birth. This isn’t just any baby. This is a baby that will become a boy that will become a beacon of light and hope for us all.

In its original context in Isaiah 7:14, “the Lord speaks through Isaiah the prophet to Ahaz, the king of Judah. At this time in Israel’s history, the land was divided between the northern and southern kingdoms. Ahaz is afraid because the northern kingdom has joined forces with the neighboring land of Syria, and he believes they will seek to destroy him and his people. But God tells him, *“It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass”* (7:7). Ahaz does not believe God, and so God gives him a sign that this will be so:

‘Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel’ (7:14).”¹

Scholars debate to whom the text refers in its original context, with most identifying this text as a contemporary announcement of the birth of King Ahaz’s son – King Hezekiah – in Isaiah’s own time in the 8th century B.C.E. King Hezekiah was destined to become one of the most revered and righteous of the kings. In this tumultuous period of internal moral corruption and disastrous invasion in ancient Israel, to Isaiah, Hezekiah was a faithful servant of God, an enemy of idolatry, a builder of Jerusalem and a conscientious and just protector of the people.² He was a true leader...one who really reminded the people that God was with them...that all was not lost.

This sign – the birth of young Hezekiah – who was to be called Emmanuel – was to demonstrate that God was “with” the people, and with the line of David, and that God’s

¹ John T. Willis, “The Meaning of Isaiah 7:14 and Its Application in Matthew 1:23,” *Restoration Quarterly* 21 (1978): 3-4. Accessed on 23 Dec. 2018 at <https://www.jellytelly.com/blog/who-is-emmanuel>.

² Rabbi Howard A. Berman, “Emmanuel: The Meaning behind the Name.” Accessed on 23 Dec. 2018 at <http://www.centralreformtemple.org/emmanuel-the-meaning-behind-the-name/>.

word would be kept, in spite of their unbelief.³ So that's the original context we think.

Matthew builds on this prophecy. The prophecy served its purpose in Isaiah's day, and Matthew does not deny that original purpose, he just sees it in a fuller purpose, which was to point to the coming Messiah. [The original passage says nothing about a virgin (Isaiah uses the term young woman) but that is the only difference. It's a pretty big difference if you ask me, but that's a topic for another day.]

Matthew draws on the tradition of other verses in Isaiah for his understanding of Emmanuel...like Isaiah 9:6-7: "for a child is to be born 'for us,' whose name will be Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."⁴ Thus, these later passages in Isaiah invite a fuller interpretation, and this is what is given in Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus.

So if you've followed thusfar...here's my creative layout of Jesus' name:
Title – Emmanuel

First name – Jesus
Middle Name – Beloved
Last Name – Child of God

“Emmanuel Jesus Beloved Child of God.” Just rolls off the tongue, doesn't it? Maybe not...but it's packed with meaning. Today I want to focus on the Emmanuel part...because it's the title part that can belong to us all.

The theme of "God with us" continues through Matthew's gospel until the very end, culminating in the Great Commission and the last verse of the book: "*And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age*" (28:20).⁵

And the idea of God's special presence living among his people goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden, with God walking and talking with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day. Then God manifested God's presence with the people of Israel in many ways. Here are two of them: "*And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by*

³ ohn N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1- 39*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 203-04.

⁴ France, *Matthew*, 57.

⁵ Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, New American Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 60.

day and by night,” (Exodus 13:21, ESV).

And God is with people like Job who are suffering and angry at God as well as with people who are praising God. God is with the wandering Israelites just as God is with the worshipping Israelites. Through Jesus, God is with the disciples – on the boat during a treacherous storm, on the peaceful hillside for a lesson, around a table for a meal. God is with Jesus during the crucifixion just as Jesus is with the ones being crucified on his right and his left. Through the Holy Spirit, God is with the early church, with Peter and Paul and Lydia...whether they are prospering or being persecuted. Scripture tells us God is with God's people no matter what they are feeling or what they are going through – whether they are feeling faithful or forsaken – God is with them.

And it all cums to a summation in Revelation 21:3: *“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.’”* (NIV)

The concept of "Emmanuel" – God with us – is clearly a theme throughout scripture. There's no denying it! It's a non-negotiable. It can't be adjusted or improv-ed out of any scenario or situation – no matter how hard you try. And alongside all of these other images and ways of God being with us, to use the descriptor Emmanuel for Jesus, the infant born to Mary and Joseph, is to say that “God is with us” in a most remarkable way...in our vulnerable *humanity*. In our messiness. In our chaos. In our everyday lives.

God is with us. Say that with me: *God is with us.*

What does that actually mean to you? Do you believe it? Are these words you hear in church or do you truly feel that in everyday life?

Do you believe God IS with *you*? Like...truly a part of your life? Even for those of us who believe this...I think we all struggle with this some days, right? Why is that, I wonder?

Well, I think it's because we tend to think of God in a very particular way – whatever that

“way” is for you...and we kind of get stuck with that image of God and it's hard to break out of that and see God in a myriad of other ways. For many of us – it's an image of God from our childhood or from culture...a God who is perhaps always watching us...not in a kind way...but a kind of surveillance way – checking up on us to make sure we are following all the rules. We have this image of God as a rule maker and task master. A God who's is up in the sky somewhere out there, looking down at us, and we are always trying to measure up, trying to make sure we are doing enough, being enough. Even if we know intellectually that this is not true – it's really hard to “unbelieve this in our hearts.” Especially if this is what we have been taught and what the culture around us reinforces.

Others of us have an image of a vending machine God...that if we put in a prayer request, we should get out an answer...especially if we put in our request with some extra money or some extra Sundays at church. But for most of us, on most days, that vending machine God seems broken. We bang and bang on the machine and shake it and

wonder, where is God? Where is my answer to prayer? I did my end of the transaction – you owe me, God!

Others of us have an image of God as Creator of the Universe...we sense God's presence so deeply in the wonder and majesty of nature. Wo much so that sometimes we struggle to see how we are significant in the vast universe of things. We are just one person. Why should God care about us? We see God in the stars, and yet struggle to see God in ourselves.

Whatever your image of God is – it's probably a very strong part of your faith – even if in an unconscious kind of way. It shapes your theology without you even knowing it. Just think about how the people were expecting their Messiah to be a warrior or a king and God came as a baby!?! God totally changes how we think about God being a part of the world, and yet it's still hard for us to imagine God has vulnerable and growing and changing...we like the powerful, unmoveable God...or do we? Because that God seems kind of static to me...not at all like the God we experience everyday.

And so, because many of us may have one main image of God then we think that there is one way to experience God and when that way isn't working for us, we give up.

Like we think we're supposed to connect to God through Scripture and we don't understand the Bible (because it's confusing!), and so we stop reading it.

Or we think we're supposed to connect to God through prayer but we don't know what to pray for or how to pray and so we stop praying and cease any kind of communication with God.

Or we think God is the church or a pastor and when that pastor lets us down or that church betrays us, we abandon the human institution of the church and often, we abandon God along with it.

I love this quote by Rainer Marie Rilke, "*A person isn't who they are during the last conversation you had with them – they're who they've been throughout your whole relationship.*" The same can be said for God too...so if God seems silent in your life right now or not answering your prayer as you wish or if you have a bad experience of the

church...remember the God of all of Scripture...the God of all of your life...of all creation.

You see, the only way we can understand God being with us always...is if we understand that God is with us in ALL WAYS...whatever those unique ways are to us. There is no one "right way" to relate to God. God being with us is as unique to each one of us as we are unique to God.

So...what if Emmanuel, God with us, means that there could be a different way to think about how God is with us...with *you*...this Christmas season? What if this was the year that a new vision, a new understanding, a new image of God was born for you? A new "Emmanuel"?

I'll say it again because it bears repeating: There is more than one way to understand God. To experience God. To be in relationship with God.

Let me give you three examples to put this in perspective.

We eat a lot of sugar around Christmas, right?. Think of ALL the ways you can consume sweetness around the holidays: hot cocoa, hot cider,

fudge, ginger snaps, snickerdoodles, sugar cookies, chocolate chip cookies, angel food cake, pound cake, sheet cake, pineapple upside down cake, fruit cake, cheese cake, apple pie, cherry pie, pecan pie, pumpkin pie, M&Ms, Snickers, Candy Canes, Starbursts, Skittles, caramel popcorn, peanut brittle, peppermint bark, oranges, pears, apple juice, cranberry juice, etc. I could go on for days. These are all totally different experiences of sugar – but they all give you the experience of something sweet in your mouth.

Or think of all the ways you can get somewhere: walking, running, biking, in a compact car, an SUV, a sedan, a truck, in a limo, a taxi, an uber, on a bus, on a subway, on the lightrail, on a train, on a sailboat or a cruiseship or in a canoe or kayak, in an airplane or helicopter. Now think of all of those things – and think of how many makes and models there are of sneakers and bikes and cars and trucks and boats and planes. It's kind of mindboggling. And all of those makes and models get you to where you need to go. At least, hypothetically.

Or more incarnationally – think about friendship. Sometimes we have different friends for different things in life, right?

You have your:

Friend who you go watch scary movies with.

Friend who is your book club buddy.

Friend who you volunteer with.

Friend who you tell all your secrets/emotional stuff too.

Friends who you get together with to watch the game.

Friends who you ski with or shoot baskets with.

Friends who you study with or who you sing in the choir with.

Friends in your church youth group or class.

Friends who are your friends because your kids are friends.

Friends you send Christmas cards to – just because you always have.

“Friends” on Facebook.

Friends from work.

Friends who you call because they'd drop anything in an instant if you needed anything in an instant.

All are of these people we call “friends”...and yet think of the different roles they each play in your life?

If we can have that many ways to get to a destination and if we can have that many ways to

experience the sensation of sweetness and that many versions of friendship...then why is it that we get stuck in just one way of relating to God or just one way of thinking about our faith? There are endless ways to experience Emmanuel – God with us – the key, I think, is that those ways to experience God are unlocked when we actually believe that God is actually with us *always* in *all ways*.

And we can begin to see God with us everywhere.

Perhaps just start with this question: How do you need God to be with you? What does that look like and feel like to you? Don't censor it. Just imagine...even if it doesn't feel quite right at first, you can go back and revise.

You see, I think it's hard to experience God in a new way if we cannot imagine God working in our life in a new way first. How you imagine God might be very human...like a friend sitting with you, or perhaps more abstract – like your breath flowing through you. Maybe it's a grander vision of justice for a certain group of people or peace for a certain country.

Jesus showed us what God's love looks like in human form and everyday interactions and conversations. Maybe just pick your favorite story or interaction that Jesus has in the gospels and imagine yourself in that interaction.

Just imagining God being in your life and in the world in a way will open you up to new experiences of God I think. I mean...it can't hurt, right?

Just as we don't know the personality and gifts of a child when they're born...or what that child will do or say or how they'll uniquely change the world...we don't know what reality our imaginations will birth – until we imagine! It's simple...but yet so hard to do. Especially as we grow older. Pretend you're a kid. Imagine. Dream.

I don't know how many times I've said this quote from this pulpit, but I'll say it again because I love it. Author Madeleine L'Engle writes, *"There is nothing so secular that it cannot be sacred, and that is one of the deepest messages of the Incarnation."*

I came across secular Christmas toy/story this week with

incarnational messages. It's called *Reindeer In Here*. And it's a counter movement to the *Elf on the Shelf* franchise. I have nothing against, *Elf on the Shelf*, I'm sure it's fun for a lot of folks. However, reading this news story made me think about the stories we tell ourselves and our kids and how they shape our theology – even when we don't think we're talking about God:

“When Adam Reed went to the store about two years ago to purchase an Elf on the Shelf kit for his daughter, he was disappointed by what he found. *“I didn't realize that kids can't touch it or that it loses its Christmas magic...that they have to keep their distance from it. And that it has to move every morning, and they have to find it, I didn't know that the elf was sent to “be the eyes and ears of Santa to see if the kid was good or bad and that the elf had to report back to Santa,”* he said. *“For me and my family, it wasn't the right tradition.*”

So Reed decided to create a new Christmas tradition for his daughter and other children to enjoy: *Reindeer In Here*.

It's a book and plush toy set, à la *Elf on the Shelf*, featuring a reindeer that Santa sends to a child in early December to get to know them. The reindeer learns the child's likes and dislikes, bonds with them and accompanies them on adventures, according to the story. While the child is sleeping, the reindeer sends letters to Santa reporting on the adventures they've shared and what the child's true Christmas wishes are (not on whether the child was good or bad).

Children are encouraged to take their reindeer with them everywhere. The reindeer is meant to be a holiday friend that children can touch, cuddle with and take outside the house – to the playground, to school, to anywhere! On Christmas Eve, families put the reindeer under the tree to return to the North Pole with Santa.

Reindeer In Here also celebrates that being different is normal. The toy has one antler that is smaller than the other, meant to represent the uniqueness of every child.

The story of *Reindeer In Here* celebrates differences. Reed says he's most proud of the

connections he sees children form with their reindeer.

“The child makes it their own — they name it and decide if it’s a boy or girl,” he said.

“The book says that the reindeer writes notes back to Santa about their adventures and wishes and dreams — it doesn’t say reports good or bad behavior,” Reed says.

“So for instance, my daughter was having a bad night and didn’t want to take a bath,” he continued. *“If she had an elf, I could say ‘the elf is watching you and you’re not being a good girl.’ But I didn’t want to take that path, so I said ‘You know, Fuzzy the Reindeer has never seen a bathtub — Do you think maybe you could show him the bathtub and take a bath?’”*⁶

You see where I’m going with this?

One toy – the Elf – reinforces the idea that you are being watched from “above” or from “afar” and that your behavior, whether good or bad, dictates the rewards or gifts that will come your way. It is always

moving – from place to place – and you have to find it each day...and yet you still keep your distance...you can’t touch it. And – the Elf always has to stay in the house.

The other toy – the Reindeer – is all about companionship. Being with the child – at all times, in all ways. The child takes the reindeer everywhere and talks to it and names it. It is never hiding, it is always with the child. It is not about watching behavior, rather it is a listening ear for the child to talk about its wishes and hopes and adventures! Sounds a lot like prayer to me!

I know that *Elf on the Shelf* and *Reindeer In Here* are not theological statements. They are secular Christmas stories. Yet, they say a lot about worldviews and even, albeit subconsciously, about faith. Is God far away and watching us to make sure we behave and do the right things? Is God always elusive – something we have to hunt for and find?

Or is God always with us, right beside us, always ready to listen to us, never hiding from

⁶ Caroline Bologna, “Reindeer In Here Aims To Be A Stress-Free Alternative To Elf On The Shelf,” *The Huffington Post* (Dec. 21, 2018), accessed on 23 Dec.

2018 at https://www.huffpost.com/entry/reindeer-in-here-elf-on-the-shelf_n_5c06d2c7e4b066b5cfa6c535.

us, always near to us holding us. Can we take God everywhere...no place is off limits?

Reindeer In Here came about because one dad felt *Elf on the Shelf* wasn't right for his kid. So he created the Reindeer. When's the last time you thought about whether the image of God you were given as a child is still right for you? Maybe it is? Maybe it isn't.

As we welcome the Christ child into our lives tomorrow night, I invite you to think about how you imagine God and relate to God. Could it be that a new way of seeing God and being with God in the world is wanting to be born in your life, in your heart?

Amen.