

Sermon: 11-29-20, God with us: in the creation  
Central Church  
Kim Fields

Here I am to worship  
O Come O Come Emmanuel  
Pat Harty - Thinking of Me

Today is the first Sunday in Advent. Advent is a time when we prepare for the coming of Christ, for God's birth among us in the form of the Christ Child born in a manger in Bethlehem. Yes, it is a time when we look forward to the coming of Jesus. Not that he hasn't always been here. God was here long before Jesus' birth. God did not suddenly appear among us when Jesus was born. God has always been here.

A story is told of a scientist who decided he no longer had any use for God. Still, he thought it best to let God know that he wouldn't be going to church anymore. So he prayed, "God, we don't need you anymore. Science has finally figured out a way to create life out of nothing. In other words, we can now do what you did in the beginning. Which means that we really don't need you any more."

"Oh, is that so?" God asked.

"Well," said the scientist, "we can take dirt and form it into the likeness of you and breathe life into it, thus creating man."

"Well, that's very interesting," answered God. "Please, show me how you would do that."

So the scientist bent down and started to mold the soil into the shape of a man.

"No, no, no," interrupted God. "If you are going to create life on your own you must first make your own dirt."

That story gets at the difference between God and man. As people we can be amazingly creative. We can take wood, paint, pen, or brush and create beautiful masterpieces. We can build machines that can do amazing things. But in the end, when you boil things down to their most basic level, our creativity always begins with God's dirt, God's trees, God's water. No matter how smart or how creative we get, we cannot create something out of nothing.

However, that is not true of God. When God started there was nothing. We read that the earth was empty and void. But then, out of the emptiness, God created everything there is.

This Advent Season, I would like to look at Christmas from a slightly different angle. Normally, during Advent, I focus on aspects of the Christmas story. That is not a bad thing. We can never plumb the depths of what it means for God to take on human flesh and be born a baby in a manger. Indeed, it seems like every time I read the Christmas story the Holy Spirit provides new insights.

None-the-less, this Advent I'd like to look at Jesus from a different angle. In the Scriptures, Jesus is known by many names — Son of man, the way, truth and life, good shepherd, light of the world, Alpha and Omega, and, quite simply, I am. The list goes on but one of my favorite names for Jesus is Immanuel. Which simply means "God with us."

Typically at Christmas time we think of Jesus as a baby born in a manger, God come down to earth to be with us. But Jesus is far more than just a baby with us at Christmas time. Jesus was with us long before that first Christmas, with us in many different ways. And it is the ways in which Jesus has been and is with us that I would like to explore this Advent season.

But where to begin? If we want to learn more about Jesus, where should we look? I don't know about you, but when I want to learn about Jesus I turn to the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Which has is why, this morning, I would like to trad from John's Gospel to see how he described Jesus. There, in the first chapter, we read:

**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.**

**There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.**

**The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.**

**The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.**

**—John 1:1-14**

John begins by telling us that In the beginning was the Word. The “Word”? That seems a strange name for Jesus. I must confess that the first time I read through the gospels, I had no idea what or who John was talking about when he wrote “Word”. It seems strange to refer to Jesus as the Word, but it makes sense if you understand who John was writing to.

You see, each of the four Gospel writers had a different readership in mind. Which is why each of them approached the story of Jesus in a different way. **Matthew was writing with the Jews in mind.** Prophecy and lineage were very important to the Jews. So, Matthew started with the genealogy of Jesus, listing his family tree from the time of Abraham forward. **Mark wrote for a Roman readership.** The Romans were more concerned with what people did than their family tree. So Mark didn't even mention Jesus' ancestors. Instead, he began with Christ's adult ministry. Which is why we don't read from a lot about Christmas in Mark. **Luke was a missionary to the Gentiles.** He was a Gentile, that is a nonJew himself, and so wrote from the perspective of a Gentile and a physician. Which is why Luke begins his Gospel by explaining his methods of research, tracing the lineage of Jesus all the way back to Adam. However, **John was writing to a Greek audience.** The Greeks were interested in education and philosophy. They were great thinkers. They wanted to understand things, to know the beginnings of things. So John, goes way back in his story of Jesus. He takes his readers back before the time of earthly ministry that Mark began with. Back before the time of Abraham where Matthew began. Even back before Adam, which is where Luke began. John reaches all the way back to the very beginning. Indeed, that is where John begins, he writes: “ in the beginning was the Word”. John's introduction is reminiscent of the beginning of Genesis, where we read: **“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” — Gen 1:1**

OK, we get why John began in the beginning, but why does John refer to Jesus as “the Word”? When you or I think of words we think of words written on a page or of word games played with paper and pencil or on our phones. But for the people in biblical times words were spoken not written. Very few people were literate or even thought much about writing. Words were what came out of their mouths.

Which brings to mind another story about words. The Genesis story of creation. When we read the story of creation We immediately notice that God spoke the world into existence. “God said let there be light...and there was light.” How did God bring the world into being. He spoke words. John tells us, “In the beginning, was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”

Did you hear that. Jesus was there with God in the beginning. Not only was Jesus there, John tells us that Jesus was intimately involved in the creation of the world. “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.” Jesus was there from the very beginning. He has always existed with God. More than that he is God, and as God he spoke the creation into existence.

So, when we turn our attention to Christ, during the Christmas season, there is nothing wrong with picturing Jesus **as a baby in a manger**. But never forget, as you look at that baby in the manger, that he was with God in the beginning, and that it was through his words that God created this beautiful world that we live in, for he is Immanuel — Jesus, the Creator — with us.

Yes, John’s first chapter starts off beautifully with the creation story, but then, in verse 10, John adds the sad commentary that even though Christ came into this world, and walked among us, the world did not receive him. Indeed, they rejected and crucified him.

We often condemn the first century Hebrews for that. We ask how could they have turned their back on Jesus? Yet, I fear that we are not much better today. For Jesus is still Immanuel. Jesus is still God with us. And yet most of us fail to see him. We look at the beauty of his creation, but fail to see the handiwork of Jesus.

We fail to acknowledge his role in the world. The founders of this nation wrote, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.” Of course the creator the founders were referring to was Jesus.

We may recognize his importance in the Declaration of Independence but that is about as far as it goes. I fear that Jesus is slowly disappearing both from our present awareness and from our country’s history. We don’t talk about Jesus in our schools. We don’t see Jesus on TV. We don’t hear about Jesus in our work places or speak of him in our conversations. Heck, Jesus is even disappearing from Christmas.

Paradoxically, most Americans celebrate Christmas, but we largely leave out the Christ! Christmas has become about Santa and elves and decorations and presents, but we hear little about a God who so loved the world that he came to live among us, to make that love real and concrete for each of us. We don’t hear much about the love of the creator made concrete. We don’t hear much about the God who is with us, right here, right now, in Jesus.

Perhaps that, at least in part, is why there is so much loneliness at Christmas. Perhaps that is why so many grow depressed over the holidays. Do you know what time of year the suicide rates peak? That is right, they peak during the holiday season. As I was writing this sermon I heard a news report about a young man who took his own life.

John wrote, **“He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.”**

I wonder if the young man who committed suicide felt all alone? I wonder if he was aware that Jesus loved him and was with him? I wonder if he knew about Jesus Christ? Immanuel — God with us? I wonder if that would have made a difference? I wonder what might have happened if he had known that Jesus, the creator of everything, loved him and was with him? After all, Jesus brings hope. Jesus brings peace. Jesus brings comfort. Could it have saved his life? Would it have brought him life? After all, John reminds us that, **“In him was life, and that life was the light of men.”**

So, what does this mean to those of us trying to live our lives, this Christmas, in the midst of a pandemic. Perhaps a good place to start would be by remembering that Jesus is Immanuel — God with us. Did you hear that? Jesus, the Creator of everything, is with us.

When Jesus created the first time he took that which was formless, empty, void, and dark and brought life out of it. Did you know he never stopped doing that? Jesus is still the way the truth and the life. He is still in the business of creating life. He is still in the business of taking things that are dark and lost and lonely and giving them new life. He is able to take chaos and create order out of it.

I don't know about you but 2020 has been a year of chaos for me. Nothing seems the same. Things don't seem to fit any more and I am not just talking about my clothes. It has been a lonely, dark, confusing year. I think this Advent season would be a good time for me to look around and see the God who loves me and is with me — Jesus — Immanuel — God with me. Jesus the God who was with us creating in the beginning, became one of us in the manger, and is with me even now. What's more I don't think that I am the only one who needs to be reminded. I think we all need the reminder that Jesus wants nothing more than to bring order into our lives, light into our darkness, and love into our loneliness, if only we will recognize him and ask him in. And that is really what the Christmas message is about.

As we begin this Advent season of light please take a few minutes to reflect on and memorize John 1:5 **“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”** Then pay attention to the presence of the light all around you, and carry the light of Immanuel, God with us, to those around you who need it most. After all, I can't think of a better Christmas gift to give than that, the gift of Jesus.