

Sermon 12-20-20, God with us: still among us
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This has been an unusual Advent season. And I am not just referring to the challenge of celebrating a major holiday in the midst of a pandemic. This Advent, rather than focusing in on the birth of Jesus, we have tried to expand our vision of who Jesus is. Usually, at this time of year, we think of Jesus as a baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Certainly, Jesus is Immanuel, God born a human baby in a stable at Christmas time. But Jesus is so much more. Which is why we looked back to the very beginning, to when Jesus brought order out of chaos, fashioning this world and all that is in it. Moreover, Jesus' work did not stop with the creation. Jesus is still going about the work of bringing order into the chaos of our lives.

We then looked at the ways in which Jesus sustains all there is, both the creation and those of us who are a part of it. Jesus did not just set the creation into motion and walk away, he continues the work of maintaining and sustaining it to this day.

Finally, last week, we noted that though Jesus came as a human baby to live among us and show us how to live, he also came as the sacrificial lamb to take away the sins of the world. Jesus may have been safely swaddled and protected by his parents on that first Christmas night, but, from the very beginning, the **shadow of the cross** loomed over the manger in which he was cradled.

Today, I would like to take a closer look at what it means that Jesus came as the lamb of God to save his people from their sins. The idea that God would send a savior would not have been startling to the Israelites. They grew up hearing stories of how their ancestors had been held in bondage by the Egyptians. Of how the Pharaoh had forced them to labor as slaves. They told and retold the great story of how God had sent Moses to save them, first by confronting the Pharaoh with plagues, and then by leading them across the Red Sea and through the wilderness to the Promised Land.

It was a powerful reminder that their God would not abandon them. Moreover, the story of being saved and led out of slavery into the promised land was not just ancient history to them. The story was a promise, that just as God came as a savior to rescue their ancestors and lead them out of slavery in Egypt, God would continue to send saviors to rescue his people in their times of need. Indeed, God later spoke through Hosea reminding them, **"I am the LORD your God, [who brought you] out of Egypt. You shall acknowledge no God but me, no Savior except me."** (Hosea 13:4) yes, God's prophets reminded them again and again that God was their savior and they should put their trust in God alone, but time and again they forgot. They became caught up in what was going on around them, allowing their neighbors to lead them into idolatry. They forgot about the one true God who had saved them. They forgot that it was God who led them out of slavery in Egypt. They forgot that God was the one who provided for them in the wilderness. Which is why Hosea (13:5-6) later reminded them, **"I cared for you in the wilderness, in the land of burning heat. When I fed them, they were satisfied when they were satisfied, they became proud; then they forgot me."**

Even though God was right there with them, loving them and meeting their needs, once their needs were met they forgot all about God. You wonder how they could forget God? Well, let's jump ahead about 1500 years to another story of salvation. It is late at night. A group of shepherds are sitting on a hillside keeping watch over their sheep, when suddenly an angel appears to them proclaiming that a savior has been born. If that wasn't shocking enough a whole chorus of angels joined in singing:

Glory to God in the highest...
Peace on earth...

Goodwill to men.

That was the night when Jesus was born. He came as Immanuel, God with us. Much like Moses he came to save his people, but this time God was not saving them from slavery in Egypt. This time, God sent a savior to save them from sin and death. Like Moses, Jesus lived with his people. He spent the next thirty years performing miracles; teaching them; healing them; feeding them; calling them to remember who they served and to follow as disciples. At first people listened. They were excited. They came out in droves to witness Jesus' miracles and hear him preach. But, over time, they discovered that Jesus had not just come to heal and feed them. They learned that Jesus had come to remind them of the importance of acknowledging God. He reminded them of God's call to live as disciples. He asked them to choose whom they would serve, God or the world. Sadly, most chose the world, choosing politics and acceptance and comfort over freedom in Christ. In the end they not only abandoned their savior, they rejected him, and crucified him.

Despite their rejection, Jesus did not forget that he had come to save them. So he offered one last gift to his people. He offered up his life and in doing so demonstrated the depth of his love; offering the gift of freedom from slavery to sin and death to any who would accept it. That was why he came, to save the world. But, sadly, most continued to choose slavery and death over his offer of salvation.

Let's jump forward another 2000 years, to the year 2020. Jesus is still Immanuel. He is still here with us. He is still doing the work he began at creation and continued with his birth in the little town of Bethlehem. He is still bringing order out of chaos. He is still caring for our needs, as he did for Adam and Eve in the garden, as he did for the Israelites in the wilderness, as he did for the 5000 who he fed with loaves and fishes. He is still sustaining us, ministering to us, and loving us.

And he is still our savior, offering to free us from the bondage of sin and lead us into eternal life. However, the salvation he offers is the same salvation he offered the Hebrews of old. As they say, Jesus' grace is free but it is not cheap. Much as he did 2000 years ago, Jesus calls us to follow him, to live as disciples. And he promises that if we follow he will free us from slavery and lead us into the promised land.

Yes, Jesus is still calling. If we listen. If we listen closely. We can hear the still small voice of Jesus calling. Let me invite you to close your eyes and listen for his voice. Jesus is still Immanuel. He is God with us. He is here right now. If you listen closely you can hear him calling. He is calling your name. Do you hear it? If you reach out you can almost touch him. He is inviting you to follow. And he promises that if you follow your life will never be the same.

Jesus offers us so much. But you need to know upfront that following him will not be easy. As I said, Jesus offer of grace is free but it is not cheap. Many say yes to Jesus, but not all stay the course. People come attracted by his promises of blessings. They are drawn by the hope of freedom, or better yet of salvation. They want to do the right thing. But, sadly, most do not follow for long. They become distracted by the things of this world and turn away. It happened to Adam and Eve in the Garden. It happened to the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. It happened to the crowds in Jesus' day. And it continues to happen today.

Sadly, Christmas itself has sometimes become something of a distraction. This is ironic since Christmas is supposed to be a celebration of Christ's birth. It is the feast of Christ. That is what the name means. But Christmas celebrations seem to have less and less to do with Christ. As Lorraine and I walk around the neighborhood, enjoying the decorations, we see Santa's and reindeer, we see snowmen and candy canes, we even see Christmas goats and dinosaurs. But we see very few nativity sets or references to Christ. If you venture into the mall you will find that it is all about Santa and buying gifts. Christmas

purchases are what drive our economy. You turn on your TV and there is no mention of Christ. Schools no longer sing Christmas carols. They have winter breaks instead of Christmas vacations. When I FaceTime with my grandkids they talk about trees and decorations and presents and the elf on the shelf, but not Jesus.

I fear that there is a real danger that what happened in the garden, what happened in the wilderness, what happened in Jerusalem, the danger that Hosea warned of, will happen to us, too. Remember, Hosea lamented that his people had “forgotten God”. And the danger is that the same thing could happen today; is happening to far too many today. People are forgetting about Jesus. People are forgetting about Jesus at Christmas.

In researching this sermon, I looked at the history of how Webster defined savior. It is fascinating how the definition has shifted over time.

Webster’s Definition of Savior:

- 1. Webster’s 1828: One that saves or preserves; but properly applied only to Jesus Christ, the Redeemer, who has opened the way to everlasting salvation by his obedience and death, and who is therefore called the Savior.**
- 2. Webster’s 1913: 1. One who saves, preserves, or delivers from destruction or danger. 2. Specifically: he who brings salvation to men; Jesus Christ, the Redeemer.**
- 3. Webster’s Today: 1 : one that saves from danger or destruction. 2: one who brings salvation (like Jesus).**

Over the last two hundred years, the definition of Savior has gone from being defined by the person of Jesus to only mentioning him as an afterthought. It makes me wonder, if the Lord does not return for another hundred years, what will the dictionary of that day say? Will Jesus’ name even be mentioned?

The world is trying so hard to forget the Christ in Christmas. Many won’t even say “Merry Christmas” lest they offend someone. Instead, they settle for “Happy Holidays”. I know many Christians who have made that choice. Why, even those of us who regularly say “Merry Christmas” give little more than lip service to Christ’s presence in the celebration. Too many Christians go days or weeks without spending time with Christ, without reading their Bibles, without listening in prayer. Let me assure you that is not what disciples do. That is not what Jesus calls us to do.

Disciples are not people who have gone forward and said a one-time prayer. Disciples are people who have made the choice to follow Jesus. To be a part of the body of Christ, to try to be a bit of Immanuel themselves, the body of Christ, the very presence of Christ in this world. Disciples are those who celebrate Christmas by renewing their commitment to listen to Jesus and follow in his steps. And that, not trees and decorations and Santa and presents is what Christmas is really about. How did we go so wrong? Let’s watch a short video that provides a brief history of Christmas:

(show video “A Brief History of Christmas” from [sermonspice.com](https://www.sermonspice.com))
<https://www.sermonspice.com/sermon-illustrations/3770/a-brief-history-of-christmas>