



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

The Feast of the Nativity – December 24, 2021

Scripture Passages: Isaiah 62:6-12; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 20 :1-20

+I speak to you the name of God: the loving Father, the incarnate Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

So last week, when I was beginning to think about my sermon for this evening, I was listening to Bishop Terry Brown preach as honorary assistant in the cathedral for the first time – thank you Bishop Terry – wonderful as ever - and I heard him say something near the end of his homily: The birth of Jesus is all about PRESENCE.

And his comment brought me back to the finest sermon on the Incarnation that I have ever had the privilege to be part of. It was given in the last year of theology degree at Wycliffe College by a wonderful professor with an incredible facility to preach to all of us, not just those who could keep up with him.

I will never forget the sermon he preached one December at the very end of term. It was about Jesus' name, Emmanuel which means God with Us. And the conceit goes like this – he said the meaning three ways: GOD with us; God WITH us; and God with US.

That God comes to us as ONE of us as a kind of divine disruption. It's the beginning of a story that we're still in the middle of. It begins with the Incarnation – the literal em-bodying of God at Jesus' birth, and moves to his sacrifice for us in love on the cross and a handing on of his mission of love to us; at which we are still faithfully working until all time is completed with Jesus' return. It's a dynamic story in which we have a major part that is ongoing and vital but it all begins here, tonight at the remembering of God's embodiment. It's the narrative that all scripture proclaims and that we are still living.

It's good to know the story we are in.

GOD with us:

So. It begins with GOD with us. And I suppose as an example of that, our passage from Isaiah this evening really helps. This is a book of the bible that is particularly clear about who Jesus is, why he came among us and what he worked to accomplish. And we, as the gathered community of Jesus' followers, read these words of course, through the lens of the Gospel.

The prophet Isaiah foretells a time when the cycle of human violence from which we simply cannot free ourselves, {check out the daily news for evidence of that;} not from war, from personal violence against each other, from violence from nation to nation, to a time when this endless cycle of meeting of violence with violence will be broken – not by some ferocious version of might equals right as we tend to try and solve things, but with an injection of divine love that is so the opposite of our ways of dealing with oppression, violence and cruelty that in its otherness, it is deeply, and profoundly powerful.

The prophet tells us that we are – like a great army that represents all things good - to rally around the flag or standard of the in-breaking love of God - this Redeemer, Jesus of course, who will walk a new path in the world, the good road as our Indigenous siblings remind us. He tells us urgently that the Redeemer is coming to redeem or regain possession of all that which was proclaimed good in us at creation.

And the prophet urges us to run, not walk, to embrace this new worldview, this profoundly different way of living: and that by doing so, and living in the world according to God's ways (which are certainly not our ways) that we will be known as a Holy People. We are the ones whom God, Yahweh, Creator has looked for - and finding us has reclaimed us in love. But the sentence does not end there – like all things Godly – it is not about us only. Not only have we been reclaimed by great love – we are to offer that same love, to live and work and give out of God's love which takes a radically different form than human love. That's why it's transformative. So, in this act of divine disruption, the incarnation, shows us a different vision of what our lives, our communities, our world could look like where, if we lived according to its precepts we would feed the hungry, house the homeless, care for the poor and the widow and the orphan.

By all these signs, by all these acts of mercy and words of love, we know that it is GOD who is with us.

This is God's plan for us. Hear it in Isaiah's words:

Go through, go through the gates, prepare the way for the people; build up, build up the highway, clear it of stones, lift up an ensign over the peoples. The Lord has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to daughter Zion, "See, your salvation comes; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him."

They shall be called, “The Holy People, The Redeemed of the Lord”; and you shall be called, “Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken.”

Now, God WITH us:

You know when I was a kid, I talked a LOT. I processed out here what many process interiorly. It was just my way. And I know I asked a lot of questions. I always thought that one of the most irritating answers to the many questions that I asked of the adults around me was, “because.” And I guess I always figured they said that because they were exhausted with trying to find answers to satisfy a busy little mind.

But some compassion for those loving adults has come with age and with the need to satisfy four little busy minds of my own and I now think that it was an accurate answer. Some things are just, because.

I reckon that’s what St. Paul was trying to say in his beautiful letter to St. Titus when he says, “But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, . . . “

It’s a beautiful answer to the question: why? Why would God come to us? Because. Because when God’s essential nature is love, and that we are, a priori, the focus of that love, well, it is the only answer to the question, “why would God come to us?” Because, love.

And now we come to God with US:

This I think is very, very important. Now I think we all know that we’ve mythologized the people in the birth narrative of Jesus. And that’s beautiful, I’m not knocking it. Truly I’m not. I love the nativity scenes and the angels and shepherd. For much of my vocation I have narrated it – and the prophecies that led up to Jesus’ birth in a live pageant. I have loved it all - the colour and the drama, the yearly recitation of the grounding words of prophecy and fulfillment in Jesus’ birth.

But the fact is, these were just ordinary people into whose life God breaks. That’s kind of the point. They were like you and me.

Perhaps it would help if we remembered that Mary was a teenaged girl – just like our own daughters and granddaughters. And that the shepherds were just guys doing a hard outdoor job - and that Joseph was an older father earning his crust as a tradesman in a close-knit community.

But here’s the thing: in the midst of all that ordinariness, the events of the birth of Christ announce to us – one important, crucial thing: that that God did and does go to any lengths to reach us in our daily occupations, to guide us and love us – he even sent his son – in the most vulnerable and human way

possible to speak to us in our own language, and in our own ways so that there could be no mistake in understanding him.

The birth of Jesus represents a disruption of the way things are – and shows us the way things could be: should be. And folks in this narrative are there for a reason – chosen for a reason to tell us things.

Think about it: shepherds – just ordinary guys like I said: doing a hard outside job – not princes, not kings, not high officials but shepherds are the first to hear about the birth of God – showing us that we are all included in God’s plan – from what the world considers to be the least prestigious to the most. All are gathered into the compass of God’s love. All are worthy. All.

God comes to a woman – a girl really – whose life plan is turned upside down in order to receive him: a girl to whom a pregnancy outside of marriage spelled social death and shame beyond what we can register in our – thank God - more accepting times. But she accepts this destiny anyway – what stunning courage she had.

God comes to a man -Joseph - whose whole idea of his role in his culture – and even his role within his own marriage is redefined – showing that God can even rewrite our relationships to make room for his presence. Again, what courageous trust he placed in God.

These are real people struggling with enormous challenges supporting each other through enormous difficulties.

And God comes to men who seek wisdom in the stars and who instead find wisdom in a stable through the deepest and most committed love that exists.

God comes to a land in which a man – in the form of the Emperor - has set himself up as God – reaching for the power of the Divine – but where the reality is that God has come in the form of Man reaching down into our lives in the power of love, and not in domination or political repression. God has come to US; to disrupt US with love.

Is it any wonder that the Psalmist sings: “How majestic and splendid God is!”

The birth of Jesus is all about presence.
Emmanuel: GOD WITH US

But it’s quite easy to miss it all in the busyness of the season – in the renewed anxiety of this Pandemic season in particular. It’s why we gather tonight – virtually to deal with some of that anxiety: to think, and to be still -- and to wonder at the incarnation – to ask the question in our hearts: why is God with us? And to receive that answer and know that it is because. Because God is love. That God is with us in God’s ways – preaching a new message of love – of strength in weakness, of wisdom in vulnerability, and the extraordinary in the ordinary.

So if, like me, you are an ordinary person, . . .because of Emmanuel, we can expect the extraordinary love of God to break into our lives to change them. Because that is the story we are in.

And it's why we proclaim it tonight. Because the celebration and perhaps the anxiety threatens at times to overwhelm the centre. But in sharing the story - in all its drama, poignancy, and deep meaning, we remember the central truth of what we believe both tonight, but next week, next month and next year that God came to us as one of us to show us what God's love looks and feels like. And how that love can, through us and in the power of the Holy Spirit, change our lives and the world around us.

That's why the narrative of Jesus' birth remains a sacred site - a kind of touchstone - for very many people inside and outside of our churches.

Tonight is the time to touch its sacredness and let it touch us.

GOD is with us. God is WITH us. God is with US.

A very happy and blessed feast of the nativity of Christ to you all.

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.