

Sermon: December 18, 2016 (Advent IV) – Isaiah 7: 10-16
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

If we do a little digging, many of our given names have lovely meanings behind them. The name Carol, for example, means “strong”, while the name Trevor means “wise.”

Today’s reading from Isaiah speaks of another name: Immanuel. This name, means “God-with-us” and the sentiment it expresses is not just a wish, but a promise. First expressed as a sign of God’s presence with the people of Judah, at a time when they were facing attack not only from the big looming power of Assyria, but from their long-time neighbour Syria and their kinfolk in Israel, the promise remains today: that in the most trying times we will experience tangible signs of “God With Us.”

A dozen years ago, one of our kids was having significant abdominal surgery. Sitting in a waiting room at the old Children’s Hospital in Calgary, it was an afternoon of suspended animation for Shannon and me, our worries for our child intermingled with empathy for the suffering she had been enduring leading up to the surgery and hopes for a successful outcome. And we were tired, having taken turns for the past couple of nights sleeping in the hospital room on one of those pull-out replicas of a real bed. Tired, achy, concerned, it was going to be a long afternoon of waiting.

We’d been in the waiting room perhaps twenty minutes when a face appeared that was both familiar and unexpected. A former co-worker of mine at the school had heard about this surgery and decided this would be a good way to spend an afternoon, sitting with us and visiting and helping those four hours pass so much more quickly.

Fortunately, the surgery was a great success – and in many ways, our healing had already begun. My friend’s simple presence had reassured us of the truth, that we were not alone in this emotional time. The simple act of being present, meant so much to me and my spouse and our child. Through this human kindness, we had experienced the presence of Immanuel, “God with us”.

Immanuel: God with Us. The hope of God, expressed in human form. Acknowledging that the sustaining love of God comes to us in many ways, then bringing that love to others. One way to express this is through the words, “we are the hands and feet of Christ.” Another term that describes how we embrace the truth of “God With Us” and bring it to another, is the term, “the ministry of accompaniment.”

It’s kind of a ten-dollar word for something that is at the core of human kindness: doing what my friend did that day at Children’s Hospital, letting us know we were on his mind, helping us to pass the day, and lessening our worry. I’ve heard it said that 90% of pastoral care is just showing up, and that is so true. Just being there, especially in a time of need or pain or confusion or worry, brings God’s presence into a room. We accompany someone in a time that is worrisome, and Christ’s own love accompanies us: and we experience Immanuel, God-with-us.

In some circles, “Ministry of Accompaniment” always refers to one specific kind of Ministry. It’s a ministry that my wife, Shannon is trained in, more commonly known as “Spiritual Direction”. The Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a Canadian Catholic ministry specializing in Spiritual Direction says this about the Ministry of Accompaniment: “Those exercising this ministry are persons who have received specific training and formation and have been affirmed as having the necessary gifts for this calling. [Those seeking Spiritual Accompaniment] require openness and honesty as well as a desire to grow in self-awareness, faith that the Spirit of God is at work in our lives and a desire to discover how one is being led by that Spirit. The spiritual director or companion is someone who walks with another person on their spiritual journey, [staying with and supporting] the person through struggles and difficulties, [listening] with sensitivity and compassion; [fostering] a contemplative, nonjudgmental atmosphere of trust and safety, [respecting] the freedom of others to make choices for themselves.” In conclusion, this website says, “In the process of sharing with another in spiritual direction, we become more aware of the presence of God in our daily lives and inner experience.” With that in mind, I would say that the calming, caring work of the Alpine Voices Threshold Choir, based here at Ralph Connor, would also fit under this category of spiritual accompaniment. In these calm, focused Ministries, it is not hard to identify that we are in the presence of Immanuel, “God-with-us.”

On its “Practicing Discipleship” website, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America talks about the Ministry of Accompaniment as “walking together in solidarity, using the seven spiritual gifts of Praying,

Studying, Worshipping, Inviting, Encouraging, Serving and Giving.” Whenever we choose to advocate on behalf of someone in need, or go into uncomfortable settings to let someone know that both we and Christ care for them, we exercise a Ministry of Accompaniment. This type of accompaniment may involve time at a nursing home, or homeless shelter, or visiting someone who is incarcerated. The work being done to seek reconciliation with our aboriginal sisters and brothers is this kind of accompaniment, and so is the work done by volunteers at Monday night Food and Friends. And sometimes, this ministry will demand that we put ourselves in harm’s way, for standing in solidarity pretty much guarantees that someone holding power is going to be unhappy. This type of accompaniment goes right back to Jesus’ words in the 25th chapter of Matthew: the ministries we do when we befriend the lonely, feed the hungry, house the homeless, visit the imprisoned, are done not just for Jesus, but to Jesus. And when we walk with another in solidarity, whether privately and person-to-person, or publicly in mass rallies against injustice, those we walk with and those who witness, see Immanuel, “God-with-us” at work.

A fourth and final usage of the term “Ministry of Accompaniment” comes to us from the Mennonite Church. In LaGrange, Georgia, there is a Ministry of Accompaniment called the Alterna Community. Recognizing that immigrant families in their area – including refugees and economic migrants - had little access to adequate housing or other basic necessities, Charlotte Flores and her husband, Anton Flores-Maisonet purchased a house for one of the families, and after three years developed an equity-sharing agreement where the two families became equal owners of the house. This initial house purchase grew into the cooperative housing project, with up to ten families from Guatemala and Mexico paying into a pool for housing, with “rent” typically at least \$150 below market prices, and each family sharing in the equity. Members of the community share two meals per week and two mornings of prayer, worship together on Sunday, and work together to build language proficiency. Given the nasty rhetoric that the U.S. President-Elect and his supporters directed at immigrants, refugees and economic migrants, there may be no more important way of stating, “THIS is how God works. THIS is what accompaniment looks like. THIS is Immanuel, God-with-us.”

In these four ways, people who need to know that God is with them, are given not just words but a real-live human being putting those words into action, and it is a wonderful thing. But I do need to raise a warning about the words “God With Us” before we get too carried away.

For much of the history of the Church, to say “God is with us” was not just a way of lifting up the name of God in thanks and praise; claiming that “God is with us” also implied that “God is not with that group over there.” Preaching professor Barbara Lundblad reminds us of this cultural artifact, which I display with a degree of hesitation: a belt buckle with the words “Gott Mit Uns” inscribed around the perimeter. These words, directly translate to “God With Us” and – you guessed it - the buckle was worn by a member of the SS in Nazi Germany. Just because someone claims that God is on their side, it ain’t necessarily so.

In many parts of the world, the rallying cry that “God is with us” is followed by actions of imprisoning, converting, limiting or even exterminating those whom God is supposedly NOT with. This is the greatest abuse of religion in the world today. Whether it’s racist crackpots in the city of Ottawa, spray-painting hate slogans on the local Mosque and on Parkdale United Church, served by my friend Rev. Anthony Bailey; or groups as big as ISIS or the Boko Haram twisting the words of the Qur’an to their own purposes, the claim that “God is with us” must never be turned into a weapon against one’s enemies. To truly recognize Immanuel in our midst is to see that God is doing new things, in unexpected surroundings, with surprising participants. So when we assert that “God is with US”, the US needs to be understood broadly, God’s great love for all creation, rather than a separation of us good guys inside the circle, as opposed to those bad guys outside the circle. As Abraham Lincoln was famously quoted, “my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God’s side.”

As with many of our readings from the prophet Isaiah during this season of Advent, we have a reading of two distinct-yet-linked meanings. In proclaiming that a young woman would bear a child, whose birth and life would be a sign of God’s presence with the people, Isaiah was proclaiming hope for his people, saying that even with King Ahaz trying to distance himself from God, God would bridge the gap in spite of the King, and be present to the people. Centuries later, the first Christians head Isaiah’s words of Immanuel, “God-with-us” and attached them to the person of Jesus of Nazareth, seeing in him God’s desire to fully enter into the hard stuff of our lives. Both the Jews of Isaiah’s day, and generations of Christians since then, have heard in these words God’s desire to accompany us, to dwell with us and in

us. Into a world that seems determined to extinguish the light, God's light keeps shining as Immanuel, God-with-Us, breaks through the darkness and inspires us to acts of costly love.

Back in 1968, as the United Church of Canada was searching for a new way to express our faith in a world that was changing by the minute. The words they found begin and end with this reminder of Immanuel: We are not alone. Please rise and join with me in the words of our United Church creed:

We are not alone, we live in God's world.

We believe in God: who has created and is creating,

who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh, to reconcile and make new, who works in us and others by the Spirit.

We trust in God.

We are called to be the Church:

to celebrate God's presence, to live with respect in Creation,

to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil,

to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,
our judge and our hope.

In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us.

We are not alone. Thanks be to God.

- Hymn – MV 120, “My soul cries out” – a song based on Mary’s Magnificat.

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