

God With Us

December 22 and 23, 2007

Advent 4

**“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,
which means,
‘God is with us’”**

Emmanuel.

God is with us.

God cares for you that much.

God cares for me that much.

God loves the world that much.

That God came to earth as a little baby—

--as Jesus—

--for you and for me.

Emmanuel.

God is with us.

It can be hard to believe

that God loves us that much.

Pastor Michael Foss writes:

**“When you were a little boy or girl,
you may have always been chosen last...
...it’s hard to believe
that God would choose you first.**

**When everything you get in school or business
is because of hard work,
work which is always judged by others...
...it’s hard to believe
that God would give you eternity absolutely free.**

**When life has deformed you,
broken you
and left you on the side of the freeway of life...
...it’s hard to believe that God really chooses you—
--knowing everything about you—
chooses you.”**

It's hard to believe,
but God reminds us again and again.

**“For you are a chosen race,
a royal priesthood,
a holy nation,
God’s own people.”**

**“In this is love,
not that we loved God,
but that God loves us.”**

**“For God so loved the world,
that he gave his only Son.”**

You see,
when God came to us—
--Emmanuel, God with us—
--God came in the form of a baby.
And that's probably significant.
God didn't come in power.
God didn't come with vengeance.

Instead,
God came in love,
accessible.
God became vulnerable—
--vulnerable as a baby,
born in a manger.

And God did that to say—
--I'm not here to overpower you.
I'm here to save you—
--through My love.

God saves you
from all that binds you.
And God does that
through Jesus, a little baby,
who would grow and teach and heal,
die on a cross and rise again for you.

Because God loves you.

So, let me ask a good Lutheran question.
What does this mean?
What is our response to
such undeserved grace?
Such wonderful love?

Mac Lucado writes:

**“The grace of God says
you serve God because you’re saved,
not in order to be saved.
You love people because you’re saved,
and not in order to be saved.
You’re responding to a system of love and peace.”**

Martin Luther calls it:
Faith Active in Love.

When you are deeply loved,
then in response,
you deeply love.

When you are accepted,
then you, in turn, accept others.

When you are forgiven,
then you forgive.

When you know that God loves you,
you’re changed—
--you live, you love, you serve in response.
Faith active in love.

Someone shared a story with me
about Wally.

It happened when Wally was nine
and in the second grade.
He was old enough to be in 4th,
but most people in the small town
understood that he had difficulty keeping up.
He was big and slow—
--slow in movement
--slow in mind.

Sill, Wally was liked by the other children in his class,
all smaller than him.
But the boys never liked it
when Wally would ask to play ball with them—
--or any game they wanted to win.

Most often, they'd find a way to keep him off their teams,
but Wally would hang around anyway—
--not sulking, just hoping.
He was always helpful,
willing and smiling,
and the natural protector of the underdog.

Sometimes, if the older boys chased the younger ones away,
it would be Wally who'd say:
"Can't they stay?
Can't they play?"

When Christmas season rolled around,
Wally thought it would be neat
to be a shepherd
in the Christmas pageant.
But the play's director
had a different idea.
After all, she figured,
the Innkeeper didn't have too many lines.
And Wally's size would make his refusal of lodging
to Joseph more forceful.

Well, like usual,
most of the town was there for the program—
--where they saw and heard
the Christmas story
from a whole stage full of little voices.

No one, on stage or off,
was more caught up in the magic of the night
than Wallace Purling.
They said later that he stood in the wings
and watched with such fascination
that from time to time Miss Lumbard
had to make sure he didn't wander on stage
before his cue.

Then it was time.
Joseph appeared,
slowly, tenderly guiding Mary to the door of the inn.
Joseph knocked hard on the wooden door
in the painted backdrop.
Wally, the innkeeper, was there,
waiting.

“What do you want?”
Wally said his first line brusquely,
as he swung open the door.

“We seek lodging.”

“Seek it elsewhere.”
Wally looked straight ahead
as he said his lines.
“The inn is filled.”

“Sir, we have asked everywhere in vain.
We have traveled far and are very weary.”

“There is no room in this inn for you.”

“Please, good innkeeper,
this is my wife, Mary.
She is heavy with child
and needs a place to rest.
Surely you must have some small corner for her.
She is so tired.”

Now, for the first time,
the innkeeper relaxed his stiff stance
and looked down at Mary.
With that, there was a long pause,
long enough for the audience to get nervous for Wally.

(“No, begone.”)
The prompter whispered from the wings.

“No,”
Wally repeated automatically.
“Begone.”

Joseph sadly placed his arm around Mary
and Mary laid her head upon his shoulder
as the two of them started to move away.

But the innkeeper didn't close the door.
Wally just stood there in the doorway,
watching the forlorn couple.
His mouth was open,
his brow creased with concern,
his eyes filled with tears.

And suddenly,
this Christmas pageant
became different from all the rest.

“Don't go, Joseph,”
Wally called out.
“Bring Mary back.”
And Wallace Purling's face grew into a bright smile.
“You can have my room.”

Some people in town
thought the pageant had been ruined.
Yet there were others—
--many others—
--who considered it the most Christmas
of Christmas pageants they had ever seen.

In one of Martin Luther's Christmas sermons,
he had the same thought.

He said:

“If you were the innkeeper,
you would have let them in—right?”
Right?

And then he went on:

“Then get up
and go help those in pain and trouble.
‘For whatever you do for the least of these,’
Jesus says,
‘you do for me.’”

In Jesus' name,
Amen