

Sermons at Christ Church

Be One Body In Christ, belonging To Each Other.

Advent II

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Emmanuel, God with us. Emmanuel. Advent is that season where we get to sing O Come, O Come Emmanuel. This particular hymn makes me feel uncomfortable because there's this part of me which always thinks that the hymn is about me. And guess what, when I was first introduced at All Saints Church, Atlanta, in January of 2001, the Rector said that we have been singing O Come, O Come Emmanuel, and now Emmanuel is here. Be careful what you wish for. Emmanuel, God with us.

The story of Emmanuel is an incredulous story-the idea that God can be with us and is with us. In my native tribe we have a folklore that God who abides in the clouds used to be very close to earth. He was so close that everyone can touch God by the simple lifting of the hands. However, God decided to move up, way beyond human reach because people would clean their soiled hands in the clouds after eating. The point of this folklore was to explain that God is as far away as the clouds are from us because we drove him away with our sins. This African folklore captures the apparent separation between God and us, with the claim that God refuses to be tainted by our dirt, our sins.

But the story of Emmanuel is different. It counters this African narrative with the assurance that God didn't go anywhere, God is with us, not because we are perfect people or righteous people, God is with us because God's grace is more than sufficient for us, God is with us because we can individually be made aware of God's breath within us. St Patrick explains with these words ***"God beneath you, God in front of you, God behind you, God above you, God within you."***

If there is any truth to this African folklore, then the clouds are descending to the point where we can again feel the presence of God among us. God is making a comeback and if the message of Advent is of the promised coming of God, then we have to prepare ourselves, every high mountain should be made low, every valley should be filled up to make a level ground. That is to say, we have to look deep within ourselves, not as a way of condemning ourselves but of birthing the God who is pregnant in us.

That is the point that John seeks to make in today's gospel story. Luke gives us a historical context in which John spoke about the baptism of repentance as a way of preparing ourselves for Emmanuel, the God who is with us. John's desire was to offer his hearers the opportunity to re-examine themselves. Remember, "An unexamined life is not worth living", and so through the process of self-examination, his hearers would begin the work of repentance.

I once heard a story of three teenagers in Wilmington, NC. They heard that a Civil Rights march was to be held on Main Street. They decided to go to the march, not to participate in the march but to see what this was all about. When they arrived at the march, they saw both African Americans and Whites holding placards and marching.

For whatever reason, they could not fathom why there was a march, what are these people marching for? They asked themselves. What was wrong with the society that these people were marching to correct? In their minds, all was perfect, everything was alright-and so why are these people disturbing the peace?

The tragedy is that when you live in a cocoon, you either fail to recognize or appreciate the limits to which you have subjected yourself. Many years thereafter, one of the three reflected on this experience and remarked that we are sometimes so blinded by our sins that we become unaware of the depth of those sins and the extent to which we have been crippled by them.

How dark can it be that a 15 year old boy would take a gun to school and massacre his school mates? The truth is that God abides in him also. The sad reality is that he probably doesn't know nor was he brought to experience the fullness of God's love for him and his mates.

If I am unaware of my sins or brokenness, I cannot seek repentance. If I am unaware of my failings, I cannot seek renewal. If I am unaware of my shortcomings, I cannot seek fulfillment. Being aware of my sins means that I can seek the repentance which does not destroy me but transforms the old me into a new me. If we are to welcome Emmanuel, the God who is with us, John, like all the prophets before him preaches that we have to go through the baptism of repentance-that awareness that comes with the knowledge and appreciation of the divine in you.

Repentance is the one process which creates the opportunity for God to come to term in you. Emmanuel, God with us. God is already in you, God's life is living itself in you but you have to discover the life that is in you, the God that is in you, and repentance makes that discovery possible.

Repentance is another way of looking at yourself and asking those difficult questions-am I on the right path? Am I in a right relationship with God? Am I awake enough to see the God which is in me? See, the awakened man or woman seeks God within himself or herself, the man or woman who is asleep seeks God in places and things and so does not even appreciate any sense of the divine within which is yearning to come alive in him or her.

We hear the prophet's constant call to Israel to repent-to let God come alive in them. The work of repentance is difficult work. Its difficulty lies in its call for honesty and the first step is to be honest with ourselves. The grace in repentance is the invitation and assurance that we should not be afraid to start all over again. The good news is that we are not starting from scratch, we're starting from experience because we have walked the way long enough to know the path that leads us home.

The path that leads home is the path of the awakened man or woman. It feels like a homecoming. A return from exile if you will. Listen to Baruch, although the children of Israel were led away by their enemies on foot, God has remembered them and will bring them back, carried in glory. Remember, the glory of God is made evident in an awakened man or woman, people who are fully alive. Emmanuel, God with us.

Growing up, I lived about 400 hundred feet from a Slave fort. All I knew about that fort was that it was a lighthouse which offered navigational aid to ships. I often think about this Slave fort which has been turned into a light house and I remind myself, light often springs up from the darkest places of human life.

The symbolism of the slave fort turned into a lighthouse reminds me that the darkness of sin cannot hold sway over light, and that, it is when we recognize the light that is in us that Emmanuel, the God who is light, saves and reconciles us to himself. Remember this, the God who saves us is the God who brings light into the darkness of our lives and the darkness of the world. The good news is that the light isn't coming outside of us, the light is in us. Our task is to discover the light that yearns to shine within us.

Paul knows that the people of Philippi have embraced the light. He gives thanks and expresses deep joy in the God who has begun a good work them. Paul encourages the people of Phillipi to rejoice. Rejoice because Emmanuel is with us. Rejoice because light has come into the world. Rejoice because the separation caused by sin and darkness has been overcome by reunion with God. Rejoice because God has restored our fortunes by taking His judgments away from us. Rejoice because the good news of Jesus has been made available to you.

Rejoice because you know how to keep yourselves blameless for the coming of Christ. Rejoice because we ourselves have experienced a kind of resurrection which produces a new being-a being who has the power to create life out of death. Our resurrection, therefore, is not entirely a future event, but a present reality which simply means that the resurrected, the awakened man or woman is now aware, aware not only of himself or herself but of others and the God who abides in all. Rejoice because you are full of the glory of the God who abides in you. Rejoice like Zechariah.

Yesterday I learned a new song at our Advent Quite Day. The words are simple "Do something new in my life, something new in my life, something new in my life today." What's the new thing that you want God to do in your life? The new thing God is doing in your life today is that He is making you aware of His ever abiding presence in you-Emmanuel, God with us. If you open your life's curtain a tiny little bit, you will see God-embrace Him, put your whole trust in Him, live God, and He will carry you with His glory. Emmanuel, God is with us. Amen.