God with us!

Isaiah 7:14-15, 35:3-10 Kimby Young

Matthew 1:18-25 December 18, 2016

“Be strong, do not fear; your God will come.” This verse from Isaiah 35 sums up the whole meaning of Christmas. God has come. The Word has become flesh and has come to dwell among us. The great and mighty, magnificent and mysterious Creator of the Universe, chose to be born in flesh and blood, in a poor tiny baby in an obscure corner of our world, so that humanity could know true love, so that God could be with us. Jesus was born to live among us and to show us what it means to love. That’s the point of all we celebrate this season – not the shopping and parties and food and decorations, not even the music and programs and family time – as wonderful as they are. The meaning of all that we do this time of year is to give glory to God, to remember the birth of Jesus Christ, and to celebrate the good news of God’s presence with us. Emmanuel has come. God is with us.

It really is rather hard to believe. Why would God do that? Why would God choose to be born as a human being? Babies are vulnerable and weak. Humans are flawed and finite. We are dependent on others just to survive. We are interdependent with others just to accomplish even the smallest task. Why would God choose to become so much less than the divine? It is a mystery. No other world religion has such a concept. No other faith tradition worships a God who would take our place here on Earth, who would become fully human while remaining fully divine. That is what is so absolutely unique about Jesus Christ – born a peasant baby in Bethlehem and at the same time King of all that is. Our entire faith tradition tries to explain and express this mystery. The short answer is – because God loves us. The slightly longer answer is – because God wanted to show us how to live that kind of love in the world.

This week we celebrate the birth of Jesus. But throughout the rest of the year we remember how Jesus lived – who Jesus touched, how Jesus taught, when Jesus cared, where Jesus shared, how Jesus healed, whom Jesus welcomed, why Jesus died, how Jesus rose from the dead to conquer all evil and to save us for eternal life. The birth is important because it points the way to a life lived fully in love. The birth is important because it reminds us how far God will go to love us. Jesus shows us what it means to love without limits, as God loves. And Jesus calls us to live that kind of loving life.

Ah, there’s the challenge of the season – really the challenge of all of our lives – to live a loving life, to show God’s love in how we live, to be God’s love in the world, and to invite others into that awareness of God’s loving presence with us. How do we show God’s love?

Perhaps the answer goes back to that earlier question – why would God choose to be born in human flesh in Jesus Christ? The birth of Jesus Christ not only shows us the greatness of God’s love. The birth of Jesus Christ shows us the potential greatness of humanity. Perhaps one of the many reasons God chose to come to be with us in Jesus, was to remind us that humanity was created in the image of God. Jesus shows us that a human can follow God’s will. We can put God first in our lives and serve God all of our days. We are able to show love in concrete caring ways. We are able to sacrifice for the greater good. We can choose to serve God by serving others. It is possible. Jesus shows us the way. Jesus shows us how to live up to our fullest potential as children of God in the image of God. We must choose to follow Jesus.

The scripture from Matthew reminds us that Jesus saved us from sin – it’s in the very name Yesu which means “to save.” Jesus saves us from bad choices that pull us away from God. That is what sin is – anything that pulls us away from God, anything that separates us from God. Jesus reconnects us with God and reminds us how to stay connected to God. As Emmanuel – God with us – Jesus reminds us that God always wants to be with us. If we find ourselves apart from God – it is not by God’s choice. Jesus reminds us to choose God – to choose to be in the presence of God, to choose God with us – now and always.

So the birth of Jesus not only demonstrates that God came to be like us. It proves that we can be like God - the image of God. We can reflect God’s love fully and faithfully. We can choose to live love as Jesus loved, as God loves. That is the call of the Word made flesh, to remember God created us in that same flesh, to remember God breathed life into that flesh – our flesh, and by that Spirit breath God called us to live as the body of Christ in the world.

Your mission statement here at First Presbyterian Church says we are the hands and feet of Jesus here in the world. We are called to live the love of God in the world in concrete caring ways. We are called to be the presence of God for someone else when that person needs to know God with us. You who know God in Spirit and truth are called to introduce others to God. You who know Jesus Christ Word made flesh, are called to be the flesh of Christ, the body of Christ, in every situation. You are called to be the love of God in flesh and blood. You represent Emmanuel – God with us.

What does it mean to be God with us? Isaiah says, “They will enter paradise with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads – or surround their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.” Hear that again - sorrow and sighing will flee away. No sorrow. No sighing. The blind shall see. The deaf shall hear. The lame shall leap. Those who can’t speak, those who have been stopped from speaking, will shout for joy. Water will stream in the desert. Wastelands will become fertile ground. Roadways will be safe. And all those who are lost or exiled or outcast or alone – all of those will be welcome in the presence of God. God will be with us. God is now and always will be with us. If you’ve made mistakes – you are welcome in the presence of God. If you have your doubts, you are welcome in the presence of God. If you are not sure what to do, you are welcome in the presence of God. If you don’t believe you are worthy, you are welcome in the presence of God.

And if you know God’s presence, if you believe in Jesus Christ, if you have experienced God’s grace, your call is to be that welcoming, loving, justice seeking, peace making, promise keeping, presence of God wherever you go. Jesus Christ has come to show you the way. Jesus Christ has come that you may follow. Jesus Christ has come so that all may know God with us. Jesus Christ has come. Share the good news.