

Sermon Text: Isaiah 7:10-14

Occasion: Christmas Eve, 24 Dec 2021

God Is with Us

Grace, mercy and peace be to you in the name of God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

A blessed Christmas to you all. This is truly a blessing for me because, although it is my second Christmas since I've been called to serve at Hope Lutheran Church, this is the first Christmas I am able to celebrate with all of you. Last year, because of restrictions and precautions, people could not enter this building to worship—one of the holiest days of the Christian calendar and we couldn't come together. I thank God that, back then, those of us leading the service with music and God's word were able to be present in the sanctuary, but the church felt rather empty without the whole congregation being present. And with the very recent jump in COVID cases, I imagine that there are not as many people in the pews present tonight as were originally intending to be here. There is importance in being present together with people. Simply being with someone can comfort the heart and bring you up from sadness. This is why God makes Himself present with us.

God being with us means that we have all the blessings and promises of God here in our midst. His hope, His joy, His peace, His salvation are all present wherever He is. The Lord Himself is the source all goodness, justice, and mercy—all of which we eagerly long for in a world fraught with uncertainty and cruelty. When your heart longed for loving companions last year—back when we could not come together—you were missing not only your family and friends but you were truly also missing your Lord. You were hoping and praying that the pandemic would cease and we could flock back together in this church to sing the same old Christmas hymns not only out of loneliness and nostalgia but because you desperately needed to be where you felt present with your God.

All thanks and praise are due to God for truly He has made Himself present—not just at this moment when we are celebrating together in this sanctuary. God became present among us when He took on human flesh and was born in Bethlehem on Christmas Day. Being separated by computer screens and phones is hard when you want to meet someone in the flesh. So, how much more desperate are we as the people of God when we feel separated from our God by the distance between heaven and earth? Our Lord made Himself present in the flesh in the person of Jesus Christ that we might truly dwell with our Lord and see him face to face, a privilege long sought after but never grasped before Christ was born (John 1:18).

This is a heavenly gift that may seem difficult to believe. Mary and Joseph held a small baby boy in their arms on Christmas Day. An infant fresh from the womb breathing air for the first time, meek and mild. It is hard to believe that this was God with them. The Lord and master of all that exists—for He made all that exists—was nestled in the arms of a young mother who had given

birth for the first time. The fullness of God's limitless power and might, who saw the cosmos begin, and who will see this world end—it is he who dwelt in the tiny frame of a little child (cf. Col 2:9). Yet, truly, there and then God was with us. He was with us at the manger where he made himself known to us. Mary and Joseph saw him face to face and they beheld the fullness of their God in human flesh. They were no longer separated by what seemed to be an unconquerable social distance. God was with them.

This is the beautiful Christmas gift. Our God becomes present with us not only to give us joy and comfort by his closeness to us in our flesh. Our God becomes present to share in our sorrows, our pains, our despair, and our feelings of isolation. God being present with us means that He gives us His goodness and blessings, yes, but our God with us also takes from us the burdens that weigh us down. He knows what a rough time we had when we could not come together to worship last Christmas and He knows the concerns people have about gathering together at the present time. He knows the ugly things that have been happening to us. He knows about health crises, frighteningly bad weather, and the continued fear of what a new normal is supposed to look like. The problems you have undergone this past year are well known to Jesus for he is God with you.

Jesus does not limit himself to the manger when he comes in the flesh. Jesus is present with each one of us in the faith for all time. Jesus is Immanuel, God-with-us. He does not stop being with us at any point in time because we are brought into his presence by faith. His goodness and his blessings are meant to dwell among us at all times in all places. We are not separated from our God by the chasm between heaven and earth anymore than we could be separated from Him when we had to worship at home instead of in a church. Our God was with us listening to every prayer, witnessing every tear, and feeling every heart break.

Jesus is not only with us for the happy times of celebration like this evening. Jesus is with us when we are at our lowest, when we need something more than a pat on the back or a canned phrase like, "Don't worry, it'll get better." Our God came down from heaven to be with us so that he could undergo the worst the world had to offer us. Jesus came to take up our suffering, our pain, our isolation, and poverty to die upon the cross alone and rejected by the world he served. God came to be with us to share in the evils that afflict us so He could show us that He can cast them off himself and us.

The evils of suffering and death riddled the body of Jesus—our God clothed in human flesh, flesh like ours which is prone to suffering. But Jesus was not overcome by any of this. He rose up from the dust of death to take up life once—to take up restoring us with his goodness and blessing as he promised to do from the day of his birth—from Christmas. To be God with us, Immanuel, Jesus came to give us blessing, to take on our suffering, and to raise us to new life. God being with us means he is beside you in faith at all times doing this for you. Even when you were shut off last year—even when people watching this online are shut off this year—your God is with you. Jesus is present to give you all the promised blessings he has to offer. Receive his salvation from sin and death. Receive his peace which surpasses all worldly understanding.

Receive his hope in life everlasting. And receive his joy that the evils of this world cannot hold him back from you.

In the time of Isaiah the prophet, centuries before the birth of Jesus, God told King Ahaz to ask for a sign—a sign that the promised salvation of the Lord would come. The request could be as deep as the grave or as high as heaven, spanning a greater distance than between earth and heaven. Yet King Ahaz said that he would not ask the Lord anything for he would not want to put God to the test. The King was lukewarm at best in his understanding of God's love for him. He didn't consider a sign to be necessary to know God would deliver him. But we know how important a sign of God's salvation is. Many of us thought we would be fine with everything going on this past year. What is undergoing some isolation to us? What is missing Christmas Eve service? What is the fear of disease, the concern for loved ones, the sting of mourning, and all other aches of the soul? It is all tragedy. We need to know God is with us. We need God present in our lives so we are not overcome by our suffering.

Therefore, God gave to King Ahaz a sign whether or not he wanted one. And God gave to you a sign whether or not you knew you needed one. God gave to you the promise that a virgin would conceive and bear a son and his name is Immanuel—God with us. When you gaze upon the face of Christ you see God loving you. You see his precious love in the manger on Christmas Day. You see it on his face strained upon the cross. And you see God's unconquerable love in the face of Christ as he emerges from the grave in his resurrection. If ever you need a sign that your Lord is with you beyond all shadow of a doubt, witness your Saviour Jesus Christ in all that he has done and is doing for you.

Whether you are lukewarm like King Ahaz or you are in full-blown despair, your God is with you. God made Himself present with you through Jesus Christ well before you ever asked or knew you must have your Lord. Even when you forget to ask Him for help, He is with you in your time of need. God is present with all the faithful to deliver them from the pains of this world. He is present with us this evening for wherever two or more are gathered in Jesus' name, there will he be among them. Jesus will be present with you tomorrow and he will be with you every day of your life unto life everlasting. Amen.

The peace that surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.