



God WITH Us

Calvary Church, United Methodist
Sermon by Rev. John Mueller, Dec. 24, 2000

Scripture Reading: **Isaiah 7:10-17**

¹⁰ Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, ¹¹ "Ask a sign of the LORD your God: let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven." ¹² But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test." ¹³ And he said, "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Imman'u-el. ¹⁵ He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶ For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. ¹⁷ The LORD will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father's house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah--the king of Assyria."

Scripture Reading: **Matthew 1:18-25**

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; ¹⁹ and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; ²¹ she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ²³ "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel" (which means, God with us). ²⁴ When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife, ²⁵ but knew her not until she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus.

Sermon:

People have many different names for the child Mary gave birth to about 2000 years ago. Of course the one we all know is "Jesus." But as we listen to the scripture readings of the season and sing the hymns associated with this time of year we also know that there were many others:

"Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, Sun of Righteousness, Wisdom from on High, Lord, Adonai, Root of Jesse, Key of David, Dayspring, King of the Gentiles," and of course "Emmanuel." All these names point to a certain truth about Jesus, his nature and who he was. They also say a lot about the people who uttered them; revealing their hopes, dreams, longings and desires. And all of them say something about the nature of the relationship between this child and humankind. The one which speaks so strongly to me is mentioned in the reading from Isaiah and Matthew this morning "Emmanuel," or "God with us."

This name tells us something profound about how God chooses to relate to us and the nature of healthy relationships for us.

I've thought a lot about this and how it might apply to relationships in general, the different ways we can relate to each other. In my mind there are four ways of relating. The first is so obvious it doesn't seem to

need mentioning: people can not be in relationship. For example, there are some people I have relationships with, others I don't. Not necessarily because they aren't nice people or good people, I'm just not in a relationship with them. A year ago, we didn't know each other - now we do. When we didn't know each other we simply didn't have a basis for any meaningful relationship with each other.

This experience can be very difficult however if we want to be in a relationship with someone else and they don't want to be with us. At times, you can try to love someone and care about someone, but they don't want to have anything to do with you. This can be hard, especially if the person is a brother, a sister, a son, a daughter or someone you had hopes of developing a relationship with. You can send cards, make phone calls, try to set up times to get together, send money, invite them over for the holidays, but they can still refuse. If they choose not to reciprocate, then there's not much of a relationship. It hurts, its painful, but there's not much one can do. Ultimately we have to accept the fact that basic to the nature of relationships is the notion that both parties need to participate in some way.

The second category of relationship is when someone does something TO you! Has anyone ever had this experience? Sadly, more and more these days, this experience of relationship is becoming common. It's most likely to happen in a situation where there's an imbalance of power; an individual or institution with more power than you, chooses to do something which effects you - unilaterally - usually without participation or consent.

A number of workers at Gillette are having this experience aren't they? Did you read about the "restructuring" taking place at Gillette in order to improve profitability? Another 2,700 jobs are being cut beginning in January. The workers, I'm quite sure, weren't asked if they wanted to keep their jobs or be included in this decision. They have had something done to them.

When others do things to us, it hurts real bad. We can become frustrated, feel betrayed and very angry. Usually it's unjust and yet we feel powerless to fight back. Getting charged ridiculous amounts of money for certain medications you need to stay healthy, or not being able to live in the town you grew up in because the housing prices are so high, or having to deal with a number of difficult changes at work due to recent company

buyouts or mergers are other examples of things being done to us.

Now these two ways of relating obviously aren't the best ones, but usually they can be found in all institutions and in most people's lives. But there's a third type which brings more hope. This is when people do things FOR us. This is a necessary dynamic of any healthy relationship. When we're young, our parents do things for us - to help us out, to teach us and care for us. Justin needs his parents and many others to do things for him right now, until he is able to do for himself. But even as adults there are times when we need others to do things for us; we need the help of others. Some times when we're struggling or going through a difficult time in our lives, we really need others to do for us.

But, this can be hard to accept at times because many of us like to be independent. We don't like to admit that we are weak or need assistance. We can even feel uncomfortable not being the one doing for others. Because we feel indebted to those who help us and we're reminded of our limitations. But actually it's a healthy sign to be able to ask for help when we really need it. There are times our relationships should reflect others doing things for us.

The danger of this way of relating is when it becomes too one-sided. For example, we let others do for us, but we never reciprocate, we just keep taking and taking and taking. We take advantage of the relationship. We wind up losing interest and investment in it. We don't develop our own gifts and strengths. We don't contribute what we have to offer.

I remember visiting someone at their home once, as they were recovering from a long hospital stay. I remarked at how many nice Christmas cards she had. She said "yes, people have been very good to me with all the cards, calls, visits and prayers. I feel bad because I don't think I'm going to be able to write cards this Christmas. I'm just not there yet." I said "That's all right, people understand." She said "Yes, I suppose they do, but maybe I can write some cards for Easter." I could see how she perked up with this thought. "You know," she said "Maybe I can for Easter. I want people to know how much I appreciate what they have done for me. And you know, I don't want to be just a taker all the time." This is a healthy attitude. And I could actually see new energy come to her as she reached for the day she could reciprocate.

So, this is a tricky dynamic in relationships. It's also tricky because we have

this general sense that it's good to do things for others. Isn't that what God wants? It is good to do for others, but even this way of relating needs to be held in check. The danger arises when we try to help someone so much that we're tempted to assume responsibility for their life. In attempting to help someone out of a bad situation, of one kind or another, we can make decisions or direct behavior that should be made and directed by the person in trouble. But, by rationalizing our actions as "help" for the one who is "helpless" the helper only serves to create dependency and provide the person in trouble with an excuse to abdicate their own authority.

Many of us probably know "over-functioners," people who dominate others in the spirit of "helping them." Perhaps some of us struggle with this trait. We think we know what is best for others - we love them and care about them and so we "help them:" We offer our opinions, keep sending them money, given them our answers, tell them what they should do, when they really should be let alone, or simply encouraged to do it themselves. This can be a fine line to walk. Sometimes in our efforts to "help" we don't take the time to listen to the other person or really share in the experience in some way. In a very real sense we don't respect them. Are you still with me? When a person is called on this type of behavior, they can get upset and defensive and start to feel sorry for themselves because - after all -they were "only trying to help!" Does any of this sound familiar?

So we have to be careful. Even in our attempts to do what is right; to relate to each other in a good way, a Christian way, a loving way, we can be acting unjustly - unlovingly. We can be negating the freedom and responsibility we all have to share and accept.

This leads me to the final type of relationship, the final category; people doing things WITH us. This last model suggests a give and take in the dynamic of the relationship; a sense of mutuality and respect for both parties. It suggests an acknowledgment that what both people have to bring to the relationship is needed for it to work - what both parties have to bring is valued. In this type of relationship, power is shared between the two. One party doesn't always get their own way. Compromise is necessary. And when this type of relationship exists, there's usually more creativity, energy, strength and love.

To me this is one of the things the birth of Christ symbolizes. It's a

dramatic expression of the way God seeks to be in relationship. God wants to be in relationship WITH us. God isn't disinterested in what happens to us. God also doesn't want to do things to us - or simply for us. Rather God seeks to do things with us; to share life because this is the way of love, of creativity and power.

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us...and to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God." As great, powerful and glorious as God is, God became dependent upon us - upon others - upon people like Mary and Joseph - to fulfill God's dreams. God's loving nature - God's desire to be in relationship with us led God to the manger and all that this symbolizes. God became flesh and blood. In this act God turned power over to you and me. And by doing so, God limited God's self and was able to share life in the way we do: God in Jesus caught the flu, had ear aches, knew what a splinter felt like, tasted the salt of his tears, knew the betrayal of friends, felt the warmth of the sun on his shoulders, delighted in the lilies of the fields, felt the joy of dancing at a wedding reception, and knew the value of true love and friendship. God did this to show us that the most loving relationships are those which embrace reciprocity - a mutual sharing of joys, concerns, pains, struggles, and triumphs.

Jesus pointed to this truth time and time again in his life and ministry. Even his powerful healing stories, lift up the participation of the one healed in the process: "**Your** faith has made you well." Why there's even a story in the bible which states that Jesus was rendered powerless in his own home town because of the disbelief of the people: "And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief."

Being in relationship WITH someone else is much better than simply doing things for them because when we only do things for others we can actually be taking away - diminishing the power of the other person. By wanting to help too much, we limit what is possible. God loves us too much to do this to us. To be in relationship with someone else means we have to not only be able to act upon them - but we allow, we permit, we welcome others acting upon us!! It is a give and take, a sharing of life that permits love to really be revealed.

I remember when Joy and I were trying to have our first child together, we had some difficulties. We had a few miscarriages first, before we had Jacob. The miscarriages really threw us off. It's a loss to have a

miscarriage, even though they are a fairly common occurrence. I remember the day after one of the miscarriages I was in my office getting ready for a teacher training day. Just before it started, a member of the congregation stopped in and closed the door. He sat down in front of me and said "John, are you all right?!" I really appreciated his thoughtfulness. You know pastors think sometimes that they're the ones who are suppose to be offering all the help, but this time a member of the congregation ministered to me. He couldn't take away the pain, but just his asking, his attention, his concern helped. Just being with me made a difference and I will never forget it.

God with us. It's more complex than God for us; God as Santa Claus granting our every wish. Are we ready for this type of Christmas message? Just as God needed Mary, Joseph, friends, teachers, a faith community, and many others to be born among us, God continues to need us in order to be born again - today - in our midst - in this world. To bring life, beauty, peace, healing, forgiveness, justice and hope to this community.

The Christmas message is that we are needed AND that we don't have to do it alone. For God does come to us and God's grace IS sufficient for us. There is a power far greater than us at work in this world, a power unleashed through our willingness to partner with God and each other. For when we live, work, pray, worship, and celebrate in this spirit - and with God - all things are indeed possible. Amen.