

Shepherd of the Valley United Methodist Church

December 20, 2020

Pastor Janet Culbertson

Guest Preacher: Adam Hamilton: Emmanuel in the Midst of Pandemic

Merry Christmas Everyone!

It is the 4th Sunday of Advent. I'm Pastor Janet and it is a true blessing to worship with you today. I'm pleased to announce that we have a guest preacher of sorts. The Rev. Adam Hamilton has provided our message today. Emmanuel in the Midst of Pandemic. It is based on his book, Incarnation which we have been following this Advent Season.

Christmas Worship Opportunities:

-The Desert Southwest Conference is providing a Blue Christmas service. It will be available on our webpage on Monday December 21st. If you have suffered any kind of loss this year, this special service is for you. I hope and pray that as you watch it, you will allow yourself to grieve and find hope in the message that Christmas brings. Please feel free to contact me if you would like to talk about it.

Pastor Janet Mobile: 602-309-0261

-We are excited about our Christmas Eve "Walk-Through" on Thursday evening. This outdoor, in person event will take you about 15 minutes. Please arrive between 6:00pm and 7:15. It features lighted window displays, live piano music and candle lighting. Masks and social distancing are required. Please join us if you are able.

-There will be a special Christmas Eve message for you to read or to watch on our website. Check your mail or email on Thursday for that.

Our **Christmas collection** will go to Heifer International this year. The children will decide what animals will be donated to help the people in developing communities. If you plan to make a **year-end gift to the church**, please be sure to mark your gifts with your intentions.

The pastor's virtual office hours will be shortened this Tuesday due to a family commitment. Pastor Janet will be available from 10:00 to approximately 10:50. Please use the link on our worship page to join the Zoom meeting.

Our Bible Study Class concludes this Monday December 21st. Please join us on Zoom at 6:30pm. The link is in your email or available by contacting the church office.

Please open the gift in your Advent kit marked Emmanuel. (Please ignore the date.)

Let's begin our worship time:

Opening Prayer:

Who is like you, God Most High, drawing near to those who are low and in need to raise them up? We thank you that you have not left us alone, but that in your Son Jesus you came to be with us, as one of us. May we sense you near us even now, through your Spirit. May we take heart in our darkest and most fearful times, trusting that you abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel. And by your grace, may others know through what we do that God is with them. Amen.

(Adapted from the *Incarnation: Leader Guide*,
by Mike Poteet)

Opening Hymn:

Advent Candle Lighting

In the past, God spoke through the prophets in many times and many ways. But in these final days, God spoke to us through a Son. "The Son is the light of God's glory and the imprint of God's being."

We light the 4th Advent candle as a sign that God is with us, bringing light and joy amid every conceivable darkness. Come what may, we are not alone. We wait, we hope, trusting that the One born to Mary is fully God. Jesus, you are Emmanuel.

(Adapted from Hebrews 1:1-3)

Sing: "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," stanza 3 (*UMH* 211)

Joys and Concerns

Wanda J's procedure went well, Heart is back to normal.

We got a \$5000 tech grant From conference yay.

Prayers of the People:

Emmanuel,

Please pour out your blessings of healing and comfort and strength on all those

who we lift up to you in prayer. When we experience hardships, help us to remember that you, God, walk with us. All praise and glory to you, our Emmanuel. Amen

Offertory Prayer:

Lord, all that we have comes from you. It is a blessing to return a portion to your church. Please consecrate our gifts and use them for your service. Amen.

The Written Word:

Matthew 1:22-23

New International Version

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”^[a] (which means “God with us”).

The spoken Word: Emmanuel in the Midst of Pandemic by Rev. Adam Hamilton (Edited)

I'm thrilled to be joining you as your guest preacher even as I'm preaching to the Church of the Resurrection here in the Kansas City area. Thank you for allowing me to join you and allowing us to be a part of your ministry today. We're in the midst of a series of sermons in which we've been focusing on “Incarnation - Rediscovering the Meaning of Christmas.” We've been looking at the titles that were given to Jesus in the nativity stories in the Gospels. Today we're going to focus our attention on that title, Emmanuel. We're going to come to understand what it means and how it impacts our lives and what it calls forth from us today.

I want to begin by recognizing that we live in a time in which there's a lot of fear and anxiety in the air. That relates to the adversity that we're experiencing in life. So, in the last month we have seen the number of Covid cases increasing dramatically. We've seen the number of deaths increasing. We've seen hospitals that were overflowing in places. I've been talking with hospital workers in the last week and they've been describing how exhausted they are mentally, physically, emotionally exhausted. The numbers just keep rising for them. And then looking at people who are working in other frontline positions; especially those who are working in with senior adults in assisted living, in particular in skilled care centers where people are working for modest incomes. They never imagined that they are going to be putting their lives in harm's way as they go in to work every day. This is exhausting for people. And for the rest of us; we're tired of social isolation. We're tired of not being with each other. We're tired of being afraid! A study was done which tells us that there's some connection between mental health and

wellbeing, and our faith; a deeply devout faith in which we are weekly seeking to worship God.

So, I want to remind you again we're going to talk about Emmanuel. Emmanuel comes from a Hebrew word which means God is with us. God is with us. If somebody asks you, "What does Emmanuel mean?" you're going to answer, "Emmanuel means God is with us." This word, unlike the other titles for Jesus which appear over and over again in scripture; this word appears only two times in the entire Bible. The very first time is 735 years before Jesus is born. It's Isaiah who was living and ministering in and around Jerusalem. He speaks this word as a promise from God. "As a sign from God, there will be a child. His name will be called Immanuel." I want to help you understand the historical context for that, and then it will help us understand why Jesus is called Emmanuel. So, in 735 BC the Holy Land had been divided. Israel had been divided into 2 smaller kingdoms. The Northern Kingdom was called Israel its capital was Samaria. The southern Kingdom was called Judah its capital was Jerusalem. They are cousins. They're all family and yet they can't get along. Bordering Israel is the Kingdom of Aram and beyond that is Assyria.

The Assyrians controlled the area and collected massive taxes from Aram, Israel and Judah. So, what happens in 735 BC is that the kingdoms of Aram and Israel decided to join forces to overtake Assyria. They went to King Ahaz of Jerusalem and said, "We're going to see if we can defeat the Assyrians. Will you join us?" Ahaz said, "No way! We're going to be crushed if we do that." So, the Kings of Israel and Aram decided that they would battle Ahaz first. They would kill him and put in a new King who would be favorable to their ideas. Then all three of these kingdoms would fight against the Assyrians. This terrified Ahaz and the people of Jerusalem. So, we read this in Isaiah 7:2 "...the hearts of the people shook as the trees of a forest shake when there is a wind." It was then that God said to Isaiah, "Go talk to the King, and this is the message I want you to give him, 'Listen the Lord will give you a sign. The young woman is pregnant and is about to give birth to a son and she will name him Emmanuel. He will eat butter and honey and learn to reject evil and choose good. Before the boy learns to reject evil and choose good, the land of the two Kings you dread will be abandoned. Don't be afraid because those two kingdoms are going to be destroyed. You don't have to worry about them.'" This little boy is about to be born so this isn't a prophecy in Isaiah's mind or Ahaz's mind about a baby that would be born 735 years later. It's about a woman who's pregnant then. It might have been one of the King's wives in his harem or it might have been the prophet's wife, but somebody's pregnant. Isaiah says she's going to have a baby boy and she's going to call that child Immanuel which means God is with us and he will be a sign to you that God is with you, so you don't have to be so afraid in the face of these two kingdoms threatening you. And then he says, "And I promise you this, before he's old enough to choose right

from wrong (which could have been three or four years old or it could have been 13 years old) before he reaches that age, these two kingdoms will be destroyed. So, this was a word of hope. The Assyrian army comes with their King and destroys the Kingdom of Aram. And 10 years later they come, and they destroy the Kingdom of Israel leaving only Judah and its capital of Jerusalem intact. The very thing that God had promised through Isaiah has happened. And that child was to bear witness to - That God is with you - He is Immanuel and before he's old enough to know right from wrong these two kingdoms will be destroyed - happened! It happened in 722 BC when the northern Kingdom of Israel was destroyed. Alright, so that was the prophecy. But listen! It had a much deeper meaning to Matthew.

So, Matthew is writing his Gospel maybe 60-70 years after Jesus is born. And Jesus died, he is risen from the grave and has been in heaven for 40 years. And Matthew is writing this Gospel and he's telling the story of the birth of Jesus. And when he's trying to help his readers understand the significance of Christmas, the significance of Jesus, - and we are his modern- day readers. He wants us to understand this. This is what he does. He draws from this obscure text in Isaiah Chapter 7 and then this is what we read. He's telling the story of the birth of Jesus. He says this now. All of this. That is, the events surrounding the birth of Jesus took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the Prophet would be fulfilled. Look a Virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel which means God is with us. A couple things have changed. Emmanuel is spelled with an E instead of an I because this is from the Greek instead of the Hebrew. Same word though, and in this text the young woman who is going to have a child is not a Virgin. So, you know Matthew is looking now at Mary who is a Virgin. The Virgin Mary is going to give birth and this child will be named Emmanuel. Now Mary doesn't call Jesus Emmanuel. Nobody calls him Emmanuel in the New Testament. This word only appears once in Matthew's gospel as Matthew is trying to tell us the significance of the birth of this child. So, here's what I want to recognize. He wants us to get this. Jesus was God with Us in a much deeper and more profound way than that child who lived in Isaiah and Ahaz's day. This is where we get to the idea of the incarnation. The incarnation - to Incarnate - means to en-flesh, right? If you have chili-con-carne, it's chili with meat. And so, to incarnate means to put meat on something, on an idea, concept, a truth or in this case, on God. But God has taken on flesh in Jesus. He's been born like one of us, as one of us, to walk among us, to show us that God exists, to say God is with you. Jesus is the sign. He is the very incarnation of God. To say to all who believe in him, God is! And God is with you, and this is what God is like, and this is God's will for your life, and God suffers and dies that you might know grace and forgiveness, and God is raised from the dead. To say Jesus is raised, then to say that the worst thing isn't the last thing, and there's always hope. All of this is

bound up in Jesus. God has come to us in Jesus. It's a mind-boggling concept and I'll tell you it is the scandal of the Christian faith. Like any other faith any other religion out there the idea for Judaism, for Islam, that God would actually become flesh, it's scandalous! That is our scandal, that God cared enough about human beings that God would seek to help us know that he is with us all the time; to know what he's like and know his will for our lives. God is everywhere. God infuses the entire cosmos and stands outside of it. Did all of God become Incarnate in the in the baby Jesus? No. The essence of God, the essential stuff of God is in Jesus, and at the same time, God still permeates everything. And Christians talk about this in terms of the Trinity. Right? Another mind boggling, mind blowing concept that God is father, son and Holy Spirit; one God three persons. And God the son enters into human flesh. Our God has come to us in Jesus. When he grows up, he does all the kinds of stuff that only God can do. He walks on water. He calls the wind and the waves and the storms. He opens the eyes of the blind. He raises the dead. Right? And He forgives sins, and he speaks with authority because he speaks as God himself enfleshed in our midst.

I had a woman I spoke to this week. She had reached out to me on Facebook as a regular part of our congregation. She lives in another state, but she worships with us every week and she said, "Pastor, I just am struggling with my faith. I lost a good friend, and I am really struggling. Again, I just wanna know; why doesn't God just show up? Why is it so hard?" And I said, "You know, you ask a question that many people have asked me before and a young man asked me this earlier this last year. He's a college student. He said, "I just want to know. Have you ever seen God, Adam?" And I said, "Well, first of all you got to remember God permeates the entire universe which is 93 billion light years across. A light year is how far light travels at 186 thousand miles a second across the course of a year and God fills all of that. So, it would be like asking me if I've ever seen air. I don't see air, but I breathe it. I experience it. I'm alive because of it. That's how I think about God. He permeates everything, but I look around at the creation all around me and I think that's evidence. I mean look; this universe is ordered and it's beautiful and it's mathematical. It's all of this that points me towards the God in whom I live, and move, and have my being according to the apostle, Paul.

So, then I said in addition to that, "I've felt God's presence in my life." I turned to this woman. I said, "Have you ever felt God's presence?" and she nodded, yes, on our Zoom call. She said, "Yes, I do feel God's presence." And I said, "Me too. There are moments where I felt like God nudged me to do something and I did it and I was just in the right place at the right time and I felt myself right in the middle of what God was doing. There are times I hear the still small voice. I've sometimes felt overwhelmed by the love of God, and sometimes I feel nothing. But I've felt it enough times that I feel like I've seen God in my experiences of God." I

said then, “If I think about it, the primary way that I see God is through Jesus. Because as Christians, we believe that God came and took on flesh and lived among us walked as a human being and so the gospel writers saw him (or you know, not all of them but several gospel writers). If Matthew and Mark were actually written by Matthew and Mark, if John was written by John then they saw Jesus in the in the apostles and everyone who is ministered to by him. They saw him and when they looked at him, they saw God. So Jesus said, “When you've seen me you've seen the father.” Paul says in him all the fullness of God dwelt in bodily form so when Christians look at Jesus we say, “Yeah, we've seen God. We see him in this: in the stories of what he did when he walked on this earth. We see what God is like and who God is and God's will for our lives. That's the incarnation. And then I shared with this young man earlier this year. I said, “You know, but here's the thing, when God came and actually did what you'd like him to do. When he just showed up, you know what human beings did to him? Like the most pious human beings among his people? They accused him of blasphemy, and they crucified him.” That's what happened when God showed up in the way we would like. So, we look at Jesus and we believe, and we trust in him, and we say that God is with us. He is Emmanuel. He came to remind us God is with us all the time and Jesus said before he left, “You might not see me, but I'm with you all the time even at the end of the age.” And so, in my own life when I face fear and anxiety, adversity (and I feel those all the time) you know, I put my trust in him. I say, “Jesus I'm yours. I trust that you're with me. I trust that you are the person that I read about in the Gospels and you show me what God is like because you are God the Son. And when I sing, when I pray, when I worship, I find this peace begins to come into my life.

I want to ask you, “Who has been Emmanuel for you?” Well clearly Jesus is Emmanuel, but who has embodied his love for you? Who was there when you were walking through a really tough time, and they came alongside you? Who reminds you that God loves you and is with you all the time? And this is the question I want to ask you. I really want you to think about this, Whose Emmanuel will you be? How will you share the love of God and let people know that God is with them this season? Here's the invitation I have; put your trust in Christ - I mean daily. Say, “Lord I belong to you. I trust you are with me. I trust you're not gonna let me go.” Then I want you to think about how can you be Emmanuel for someone else.

Pastoral Prayer:

Let's pray: Oh God, how grateful we are to you that you came to us in Jesus. That you came to walk among us in the flesh to show us who you are, to show us that you are, to help us understand your will for our lives. To know in your suffering and death on the cross that we are forgiven and set free, and that in your resurrection, Jesus, we find that the worst thing is never the last thing and there's always hope. We trust you. Help us to trust you when we're afraid; to pray, to sing, to worship, to listen. And then, Oh Lord, help us, to have our eyes wide open to see who is it who needs Emmanuel now? Who is it who needs us to put flesh on the truth that you are, and on your love, so they might find somehow seen in us your presence your love use us we pray in Jesus name? Amen

Merry Christmas!
God be with us.