

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
Midweek Advent  
December 9, 2020  
Sermon by Pastor Justin Gran  
**God with us in word and sacraments**

— Matthew 28:18-20

One of the most frequent requests I hear from my little children is, “Will you go with us.” If we say, “Please go to your room and get your jammies,” They are bound to say, “Will you go with us?” Or sometimes being in a new setting some children may be a little shy. If mom and dad give them a gentle nudge to go and play they may likely say, “Go with me!” It’s a simple yet vital need of small children to have someone with them. We were all there at one point in our lives—totally dependent upon someone to be with us to meet our physical and emotional needs. But we grow up. We mature and we become more independent. We learn to fend for ourselves. We learn to do things without someone having to be right there holding our hands for every simple task. And that’s good.

However, it’s still one of our most basic and vital needs to have someone to be with us to encourage us or simply to enjoy one another’s company. Maybe this year especially it’s become so evident how important connecting with other people really is. If you are not able to see a loved one face to face or spend a holiday with them in person you express, “I wish I could be there with you” or “We wish you could be here with us.” And maybe that person says, “I’ll at least be with you in spirit... I’ll be thinking about you.” It’s a nice thought, but it’s not quite the same as having that person right there with us and seeing him or her face to face.

Our theme for midweek advent is Emmanuel, God with us. But right now we are here and Jesus has ascended into heaven. And yes he is with us as he is true God and present everywhere. But from our limited perspective, it’s not quite like having someone right there with us, face to face. Jesus’ disciples grappled with that reality too. In our lesson from Matthew 28, Jesus gathered his disciples on a mountain in Galilee. Soon he would return to his Father and ascend into heaven. The disciples wouldn’t be able to sit across a table from him and see him face to face as they once did. But Jesus told them this: **“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”**

Though he would soon ascend into heaven before their very eyes, Jesus still would live up to his name—Emmanuel, which means God with us. If you were to flip back all the way to Chapter one of Matthew, There Matthew adds this note after the account of the Angel Gabriel announcing Jesus’ birth to Joseph: **“All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.”** And now look at the very last words of his gospel, Emmanuel’s promise **“And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”**

Jesus still lives up to his name today. He is the “with-us God.” He is with us in Word and in the Sacraments. Even greater than our need to connect with other people is our need to connect with God. Sadly we can so easily forget that. We become independent and learn to fend for ourselves and become self-sufficient, and we lose that child-like humility that admits we need someone. We need our God to come to be with us and take us by the hand, to guide us with his Word. And yet we may be too quick to try and figure things out on our own or to rely on other coping mechanism in times of need. We forget that God’s Word is living and active, that it’s relevant to us and our lives, so we neglect it. We need God’s grace just as much now as we did when it was first poured out on us in Baptism. Yet as we daily struggle with sin we easily forget that we are clothed with Christ and his righteousness, and we arrogantly think we can handle the struggle on our own. We need communion with God and with others as we approach the Lord’s Table and there he comes to be with us, but at times our thoughts can be elsewhere.

Or other times we recognize so clearly how much we need that connection with God but we begin to doubt and feel as though God is not with us as he once was. It could be because we’re looking for God to come in ways or places he hasn’t promised to meet us. If you are looking for earthly success as a sign that God is with you what happens if you experience failure? If you are looking for God in your own experience or emotions and you expect him to commune with you on your own terms, you’re setting yourself up for disappointment. Or maybe you feel all alone, especially now and sometimes you wonder, where is God right now when I need him.

Remember Jesus still lives up to his name and to his promise. When Jesus promised, **“Surely I am with you always to the very end of the age,”** it’s not like when some says today, “I wish I could be right there with you. But I’ll be with you in spirit” or “you’ll be in thoughts.” No, When Jesus says, “I am with you,” he means it in a very real and special way. Emmanuel, God with us, comes to us in places we can see and hear and touch and taste.

He comes to us in his Word. God doesn't communicate with us in strange or vague ways. He communicates with us the same way people do. He uses words. God is not a human being. He is Spirit and yet he uses human language to communicate spiritual truth to us. God gives us a glimpse of his mind and reveals his will in his Word—words we can pick up and read. When you are discouraged, troubled, guilt ridden, there in his Word Jesus comes with his words of pardon and peace. You have his promise of forgiveness in writing. And if you think, well it's not the same as seeing him face to face, remember this: Jesus gives believers the wonderful privilege and authority to tell penitent sinners your sins are forgiven. When another Christian speaks those simple words, "I forgive you," those are the words of Jesus. You hear your Savior's words from real lips. He even said right in the middle of Matthew's gospel, "**where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.**"

Jesus is with you through your baptism. Jesus instituted baptism and then he gave that promise, "**I am with you always to the very end of the age.**" God attaches his invisible grace and intangible spiritual blessings to something so tangible and available as water. It's not just plain water; it is water connected with God's Word. And it's not merely a symbol, but it works forgiveness of sin, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe. No matter how old you get, no matter how long ago you were baptized, you don't age out of the blessings of baptism. God's grace and mercy he poured out on you there is just as new and refreshing as it was on the day you were baptized. And there in your baptism you find assurance of your identity in Christ, you are a child of the triune God. In baptism, you are connected so intimately with Jesus in baptism that his death on the cross counts as your. His victorious resurrection is yours.

Jesus communes with us in a very special way. We call it Communion. Wouldn't that be something if you got to be with Jesus like his disciples were? If he could just come up to you and put his arm around you to lift up your spirits and give you a hug. He does come to us in a very real way. In bread that we touch and wine that we can taste, Jesus gives us his true body and true blood for us to eat and to drink for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus is really there in the bread and wine. And not just as a technicality. It's not like, "well technically he's there because he's everywhere." He is present in a very real and special way in communion. There is no other presence like it. There Jesus is with us as often as we eat and drink. He is there to lift the burden of our sin and to wrap us in the warm embrace of his love and peace.

Advent is a season of watching and waiting. As surely as Christ came a first time, he will come again. As surely as he has ascended into heaven in glory he will return in glory. But in the mean time, he has not left us hanging. Has not left us here on earth to hold our own and fend for ourselves. He has promised, "**Surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.**" He still lives up to his name. He is surely with us in word and sacrament to strengthen and sustain us until that glorious day when we shall see him face to face. Amen.