

“God is With Us”
Isaiah 7:10-16
Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19
Romans 1:1-7
Matthew 1:18-25

God’s promise of a Messiah is grounded in God’s intention to reconcile each one of us to the Father and transform a broken world.

Joshua Bell emerged from the Metro and positioned himself against a wall beside a trash basket. By most measures, he was nondescript—a youngish white man in jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt, and a Washington Nationals baseball cap. From a small case, he removed a violin. Placing the open case at his feet, he shrewdly threw in a few dollars and pocket change as seed money and began to play. For the next 45 minutes, in the D.C. Metro on January 12, 2007, Bell played Mozart and Schubert as over 1,000 people streamed by, most hardly taking notice. If they had paid attention, they might have recognized the young man for the world-renowned violinist he is. They also might have noted the violin he played—a rare Stradivarius worth over \$3 million. It was all part of a project arranged by *The Washington Post*—“an experiment in context, perception, and priorities—as well as an unblinking assessment of public taste. In a banal setting, at an inconvenient time, would beauty transcend?” Just three days earlier, Joshua Bell sold out Boston Symphony Hall, with ordinary seats going for \$100. In the subway, Bell garnered about \$32 from the 27 people who stopped long enough to give a donation.¹

Joshua Bell was with the people. But he could not garner the money worthy of his musicianship, because of the context he was in...a DC Metro station. Emmanuel means “God is with us.” God is with us now, in this place, in every context, and in our lives. Do you recognize him?

The texts in Isaiah 7:10-16, Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19, Romans 1:1-7, and Matthew 1:18-25 proclaim that our sense of self and sense of worth is most true when we embrace Jesus, God with us.

¹This illustration found at www.preachingtoday.com in the lectionary section of sermon illustrations. Gene Weingarten, “Pearls Before Breakfast,” in *The Washington Post* (April 10, 2007).

Isaiah 7:10-16 boldly proclaims the truth that God is with us. Isaiah 7:13-14 reads referring to the birth of Jesus, “Then Isaiah said: ‘Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.’”

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19 beckons us to live in the light. The inbreaking of God’s light into the world through the birth of Jesus means we do not need to be consumed by the darkness of life. God is with us. We can be restored in God’s light. Psalm 7:7 reads, “Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine that we may be saved.”

Romans 1:1-7 is a reminder that God is with us. All of life is a gift of God’s grace and peace. That said, God’s passion is for those who love God. And for others to experience the love of God whose grace and peace moves people to begin the process of conversion. Advent asks us to wait and be patient for the outpouring of God’s grace and peace in all circumstance and on all people. Romans 1:7 declares, “To all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God and Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Matthew 1:18-25 articulates that God speaks to people through dreams. Dreams are another avenue where we experience that God is with us. Gabriel spoke to Mary and said that she would bear a son, given to her by the Holy Spirit, not by her betrothed Joseph. For Mary and Joseph did not live together. Joseph did not cancel the marriage, because he trusted the instructions he received from God in a dream. Matthew 1:23-25 reads, “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us.’ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as

the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.”²

A young woman would give birth to a son and the son would be named Emmanuel, which means “God is with us.”

We talk the talk of the Christian faith, yet we often deny the very power of it. The incarnation, God becoming human in Jesus Christ, yet remaining fully God, is a powerful doctrine, when we realize that the very God who creates us is the same God who saves us, the same God who lives in us, the same God who sustains us throughout life, and will be the same God who returns to take us to live with God forever. When we believe in Jesus Christ, the power of God is ours. What a definer of our sense of self and sense of worth. Pastor and author Timothy Keller writes,

When we ask God the Father to accept us, adopt us, unite with us, not on the basis of our performance and moral efforts but because of Christ’s, we receive a relationship with God that is a gift. It is not based on our past, present, or future attainments but on Christ’s spiritual attainments. In the Christian understanding, Jesus did not primarily teach or show us how to live (though he did that too) but to actually live the life we should have lived, and die in our place the death---the penalty for our moral failures---we should have died.³

The Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love Candles are lit. Advent is about the incarnation. The incarnation is the historic event when God the Father made himself known as God the Son. Jesus Christ, God incarnate, was both true God and true human. Quoting John Calvin, another reformer of the church in the sixteenth century, “It was of the greatest importance that he who was to be our Mediator be both true God and true man...The

²In all five sections of textual analysis, I have benefited from the thinking of Sharyn Dowd, James D. Freeman, Marci Auld Glass, Emerson B. Powery, Anna Olson, Sharyn Dowd, and Lauren F. Winner in *Connections, Year A, Volume 1* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 50-52, 52-52, 54-55, 56-57, 58-60, 61-63 and 63-64.

³Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God* (New York, New York: Viking, 2016), 136.

situation would surely have been hopeless had the very majesty of God not descended to us, since it was not in our power to ascend to him.”⁴ Jesus lives your sense of self and sense of worth.

Advent is the arrival of your new identity. Advent lifts up your new identity, a most powerful one. Advent demonstrates that your identity was prepared for you from the very beginning, prior to creation. And Advent boldly declares that God is with us. There is hope, peace, joy and love given to you to live in the interval between birth and death. Joshua Bell was with the people. But he could not garner the money worthy of his musicianship. May this Advent be the re-discovery of your true sense of self, sense of worth, and identity. Emmanuel means “God is with us.” Yes, you can become more like Jesus. Amen.

*This sermon was preached (for the In-Person, Online, and Village TV 6 congregations)
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⁴John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, translated by Ford Lewis Battles and edited by John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 464.