12/12-13/20 Emmanuel is Coming Rev. Amy Haines

MT 1:18-25 In the Waiting Advent Series

What are you waiting for today? Are you waiting to celebrate Christmas in whatever form that will take this year? Are you waiting for the end of finals? Are you waiting for the vaccine to be distributed? Are you waiting for the end of 2020?

This year has been one long year of waiting. First waiting for schools and businesses to re-open,

then waiting for the numbers of those infected to go down, then waiting for our society to begin to value all people, then waiting for election results, then waiting for the promise of a vaccine to become reality, then waiting for the year to simply be done.

Among our collective waiting, individually there are many more reasons we wait, some in hopeful expectation and some in bleak resignation.

Parents in Springboro School District do not have to wait until January to find out the students’ first week back then will be fully remote.

A high school classmate of mine is not only waiting for her family members to recover from COVID but is also waiting until they are well to have a proper funeral for another family member.

My cousin and his wife are excitedly waiting for the arrival of their child sometime in early 2021. My aunts and uncles are impatiently waiting for the time when they can easily travel to see their grandchildren out of state.

There are many reasons we wait, and many ways we wait. Sometimes we wait passively, and other times are active in our waiting. Sometimes we wait impatiently, and other times we wait calmly.

Even in the church, we are called to a season of waiting. That is what Advent is about. A season of expectant waiting for the coming of Christ at Christmas. But more than simply waiting for the celebration of Christmas, Advent is a time to also prepare our hearts and minds for the good news that Emmanuel is coming—and Emmanuel is here!

Emmanuel means God with us. Does that good news that God is Emmanuel, God is with us,

scare you or excite you? Often I have found that a response to that question depends on our view of God.

The good news of God-with-us excites us when we view God as one who wants the best for us and for our world, and so the coming of God means that “justice is done, righteousness abounds, and love reigns.”

The good news of God-with-us scares us when we view God as the dispenser of justice through judgment and we feel that our lives are not worthy of God’s presence at this time.

In reality, God is both a God of love and a God of judgment. We are sinners saved by grace.

We need to listen a little more to the truth of our sinful ways, yet also recognize that the truth is spoken from a loving heart who sent Jesus to redeem us.

On Easter Sunday this year we celebrated the good news of the resurrection from the Gospel of Matthew, which proclaimed the women left the tomb in fear and great joy.

Isn’t that mixture a part of our lives not only at Easter, not only at Christmas, but also every day? We live in fear—and hope. We live by anxiety—and joy.

As Rev. David Lose once explained, each day we live by fear and joy:  
…Fear of what may happen to our children in a dangerous world;

joy at the blessing they are to us and, we pray, they will be to the world.

Fear of whether we will have a job in the year to come;

joy at the colleagues that surround us.

Fear about the fate of a loved one struggling with illness;

joy in the gift that person has been to us.

Fear about the future amid problems both national and global;

joy in the present moment surrounded by those we love.

Fear about the future of our congregation and church;

joy in our call to proclaim the gospel.

--David Lose “Dear Working Preacher: Easter Courage” 4-16-14 workingpreacher.org

We are not the first, not will we be the last, to wait. And hope. And fear. And rejoice.

The prophet Isaiah spoke God’s Word to a people in exile. He spoke of judgment—and grace.

He spoke of hope—and renewal.

The first week of Advent, we heard Isaiah’s words of comfort, as the people were given the good news that they could return to Jerusalem, rebuild the Temple and the city, and renew their identity as the people of God.

The second week of Advent we heard Isaiah’s words through the prophet John the Baptist,

who called the people of God in the first century to prepare for God’s arrival through the forgiveness of sins.

In today’s scripture, the Gospel of Matthew connects Mary and the birth of her child

with the prophet Isaiah’s words in Isaiah 7:14, which declares:

“Therefore, 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 Immanuel.” (CEB)

Matthew is less concerned with the details of Jesus’ birth and more concerned with the understanding of who was born on that night long ago who fulfilled the words of the prophets.

Emmanuel is coming, Isaiah continued to proclaim.

Emmanuel is now here, Matthew declared.

This is the good news we are to prepare for throughout Advent and celebrate throughout the year! Emmanuel is the gift of God with us. Jesus is Emmanuel, a gift of hope, born into the ordinariness of our world.

Matthew doesn’t sugarcoat the struggles of God’s people, and that Jesus was born to an ordinary couple in an ordinary town in the midst of a broken world.

“Matthew paints a picture of a world so deluded by power, so soaked with blood, so prone to violence and addicted to revenge, that we wonder why in the world anyone would want to bring a child into that kind of world.”

As Rev. Magrey DeVega reminds us, “In other words, it’s not unlike the world we live in today.”

-Magrey DeVega “Songs for the Waiting” Ch 21: Emmanuel p.71-73

Judea was under Roman authority, and Rome ruled through violent obedience. When Rome said you needed to be counted for the census, you traveled to your family’s hometown.

When Rome raised taxes, you paid them. When a young woman was found to be with child out of wedlock, the proper punishment was stoning.

As a faithful Jewish man, Joseph was expected to publicly punish Mary or divorce her, which would make Mary and her child outcasts. Her pregnancy would be a scandal with or without Joseph’s support.

Only through divine intervention was Joseph truly supportive of Mary. One evening an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

In the midst of a struggling world, in the midst of Joseph’s dilemma, God gave a vision of hope,

not only for this ordinary couple, but for the world.

Call him Jesus, which means God saves, because he will save his people from their sins. He will save all people from their sins, when they seek to believe and follow him.

This alone is good news! God sent a Savior.

Yet this Savior was also Emmanuel, God with us. God chose to come and be with us. God chose to come and offer us God’s own presence, love and grace.

Joseph listened to the words of the angel, took Mary as his wife, and named their son Jesus.

Together they overcame the scorn and shame and disappointment of their hometown. Together they traveled to an overflowing Bethlehem, and there found room for her to give birth. Together they fled to Egypt, and together they returned to Nazareth. Each step of the journey Joseph listened to God’s Word and God’s messengers, and each step of the journey knew that God was with them.

Just because God is with us does not mean that our lives will be an easy journey. We still face the evil and struggles of this world. We still face the consequences of our own actions. We still face the challenges of our culture.

Yet, through it all, God has promised to be with us. And through God’s Son Jesus, God has promised to redeem us and renew us to live by God’s Ways in the midst of our uncertain futures.

Emmanuel is coming—the prophet Isaiah proclaimed.

Emmanuel is here—the Gospel of Matthew declared.

Emmanuel is still with us—our worship today reminds us.

We, too, are forgiven. We, too, are freed for new life. Even amid the challenges or the contentment of our lives, God is still with us.

Are we ready to rejoice in this good news this day? Jesus is God’s gift of hope and love and joy and peace.

This joy is not the fleeting emotion of happiness, but the conviction that no matter what we face, God is still with us. The God who was and is and always will be seeks to be in relationship with each and every one of us!

As Pastor Marvin McMickle explains:

..“That is what separates joy from the false gods of happiness, pleasure and thrills. When you have joy, the devil can throw everything he has against you and you just keep on pushing-

not because you are that strong, but because God is bigger than anything that life can do to you.”

--Marvin McMickle “After All I’ve Been Though I Still Have Joy” preaching.com:joy

When we face life in this joy of God-with-us, then we can move forward in faith and faithfulness, following in the footsteps of Joseph. Living by trust amid fear, living by hope amid ordinary life.

..In the early 1700s, there was a man who was often sick as a baby. As a youth he was unable to play sports with boys his age because he was frail and delicate. As a young man we entered the ministry, yet due to his fragile health, was unable to serve his growing congregation. Amazingly, he did not dwell on his troubles. In fact, his spirit soared. Unable to serve his congregation,

he turned to hymn writing after having complained about the poor quality of hymns in his day,

with few songs conveying hope and joy. This man went on to write over 600 hymns of praise

before his health collapsed in 1748, one of the most remarkable collections known to the world.

The name of this preacher turned hymn writer? Isaac Watts. And one of his most famous hymns we love to sing at Christmastime: “Joy to the World.”

Isaac Watts discovered joy in his life because he knew that God would never desert him.

He was able to live his life with all sorts of health problems because he knew that God was with him. His joy and faith came from deep within his heart.

-adapted from Timothy J. Smith via Sermons.com newsletter on preaching.com:joy

In these final two weeks leading up to Christmas, I invite you to live by joy—the joy of knowing God is with us. No matter what we face, God seeks to be with us.

In these final two weeks leading up to Christmas, I invite you to live in joyful anticipation that

Emmanuel is coming—and Emmanuel is here! Then give thanks and live by faith in our Savior and Lord, who was and is and is to come.

Let us pray:

O holy Child of Bethlehem,

descend to us, we pray;  
cast out our sin, and enter in,  
be born in us today.  
We hear the Christmas angels  
the great glad tidings tell;  
o come to us, abide with us,  
our Lord Emmanuel!

Amen.

-Philip Brooks, verse 4, O Little Town of Bethlehem