

God With Us
Matthew 1: 18-23, John 1:14
December 29, 2024 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

It is still Christmastide, until next Sunday, when the Magi will appear. We still have our decorations up here in the church. Christmas carols are still the order of the day. But the hustle and bustle are dying down, so we have time at last to reflect on it all.

There are some things that just mean “Christmas” to me. Every year, we put up the same decorations in exactly the same place in our house. A wooden “Merry Christmas” sign hangs in the living room. There is a lighted wreath over our fireplace. Every year we hang the same ornaments on our Christmas tree. We have had some of them for decades, since our children were little. The same angels, and red sleighs, and bells hang from the branches every year.

For many years, in our house, the Saturday after Thanksgiving was Cookie Day. Our daughter Anna would come over to help me make dozens and dozens of cookies to give away to friends and family. (And cookies to eat, ourselves, of course.) Fresh, warm sugar cookies smell like Christmas to me.

I know you have your own touchstones, too. Christmas is about more than cookies, of course, but cookies and ornaments and lights help us to “get there.” They help us get to the mystery of Christ’s birth.

Our reading from the Gospel of Matthew today is about the very core of that mystery. The angel tells Joseph that Jesus will be called Emmanuel, which means “God with us.” Think of that: Almighty God, Creator of heaven and earth: here with us.

God. With. Us.

Not Jesus with us. Or even the Son of God with us (though he is called that elsewhere). Here, the angel says that in some way Jesus IS God, God’s very self, or a part of God’s very self, with us in human form. The Gospel of John says much the same thing: The Word, which had existed from the beginning, that Word became flesh and lived among us.

In Jesus, God shows us for the very first time just who God is. Every other picture we have of God is from an indirect source. It is people writing ABOUT God. But Jesus is where God unambiguously reveals God’s own self to us. We should believe what we see there.

When we see Jesus, we see God. So, we know that God IS love, because we see that Jesus IS love. In Jesus we see a God who loves absolutely everyone, and who has a special place in his heart for those that the rest of the world despises and overlooks.

In Jesus we see God who calls us to stand right there with the ones who are hungry or poor or in prison and to work to change the conditions that make them so.

In Jesus, we see God who tells us the truth about our own life stories, who knows who we are, and who loves us anyway. We see God who wants us to be whole.

In Jesus, we see God who doesn’t promise us a life free of hardship, but who is willing to be with us in the best and the worst that life has to offer.

Two thousand years ago, God rushed toward us with all of Godself. And I believe that it is God’s coming to us, God’s choice to be with us, that redeems us.

Why would God do this? Why would God take on the ... weight ... and fallibility of human life? Why would God embrace the stubbed toes and skinned knees, the hammer hitting thumb in the carpenter's shop, the friends who insisted that they loved him and then betrayed him anyway? Why would God embrace human life at all, knowing that it ends – inevitably – in death? Why?

Because God loves us and wants to be with us. Not just with some of us. And not just with us at our best. God loves US as we are. God loves US so much that God wants to be with us, even if it means being mortal like us.

In the Incarnation, God says: "You are not alone. I am with you. Whatever joy or love fills your heart, I feel as well. When you feel sadness or pain, I am there with you, because I have already experienced all those things. Everywhere you go in life, even through death and beyond it, I have already been. I can show you the way."

Last week we celebrated the birth of the Christ child. Emmanuel. God with us. It is not too late to bake some cookies, and Christmas carols are still okay for another week or so. Look again at the ornaments on your tree and give thanks for the memories there – angels and sleighs and Christmas bells and the little hands that used to hang them on the tree. Call the ones you love, and call the ones who are lonely. It is not too late to open your heart to the mystery of this season.

God is with us. And God is love.

Amen