

**“Jesus...Emmanuel?”**  
**Sermon by Pastor Tom Warren**  
**Peace United Church of Christ**  
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Once upon a time, there was a young pastor. This was in the days before gray hair, and this young pastor got very excited because a woman who had been attending his church said to the pastor at the door one morning “I think I’m ready to join”. That young pastor, visibly excited, said to the woman, “Well, come by my office this week and we can make plans for your joining”. So, a few days later they got together, and when they met, their conversation was great. They understood God in very similar ways. They saw the world and its struggles in very similar ways. They even saw the mission of the church in very similar, and exciting, ways, so the conversation went really well, and then that young pastor asked the woman another question, “How about your husband? Will he be joining too?” to which she replied “No, he will attend but he is a deist”. The young pastor, not wanting to look stupid, said “Oh, we will look forward to having him with us”. The young pastor didn’t know what deism was. He knew what atheism was. He knew what agnosticism was, and this young pastor was pretty “hip” so he even knew what Buddhism was—sort of—but deism? What kind of freaky religion is that? So this young pastor looked up the word “deism”.

Deism is the belief in the existence of a God who created the world but who remains indifferent and separated from it. Deists believe in the power of human reasoning and the revelation of God and the processes of nature. God creates the world, spins it off and leaves it in human hands. After reading that definition of deism, the young pastor thought to himself, “Isn’t that what we believe?”

For the last 2 Sundays I have been exploring different names and titles that we have given to Jesus. Specifically, I looked at the concepts of Jesus as The Messiah, The Anointed One, and as Jesus as The Prince of Peace, and if I was to continue preaching on about the various names that are given to Jesus in Scripture, it would take nearly two years of Sundays to get through all the names. I assure you that I won’t be doing that, but in the Bible, Jesus has given nearly 100 different names and titles, so besides the name Messiah and Price of Peace, Jesus was named The Bright Morning Star, The Wonderful Counselor, The Root of Jesse, The Alpha & The Omega, The Lamb of God, The Good Shepherd and so on, but perhaps the most important name given to Jesus was the name Emmanuel (God With Us) because with that name, He made, not just a claim about Jesus’ character as in Good Shepherd or Wonderful Counselor, and in that name Emmanuel, we make, not just a claim about Jesus’ role in Jewish history and thought, as in Messiah or Root of Jesse, but with the title of Emmanuel (God With Us), we make the theological claim about where God is in the world, how God is present in the world, and what God’s agenda is in the world.

God, through Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God With Us is revealed through this title as active in history, but if Jesus Christ is the revelation of God With Us, the true power of this name is not just in understanding how, when and where God works in the world, but in the name Jesus, Emmanuel, God has not simply given a name to His Son, but God has, on some fundamental level, made us. In naming Jesus, God makes a claim on our lives. God says “You are my people to whom I send Jesus Christ”. To have Jesus as God With Us is an awesome, and extremely delicate, responsibility.

Now, in traditional Christian thought, the idea that God is with us often solicits the question of why we need God. The answer to such a question is that we need God because we are not

God and, therefore, we are somehow incomplete. We need God to make us whole.

Along those same lines, traditional Christian thought states that we need God with us because we have, in our sinful nature, somehow been separated from God and wholeness is lacking. On a different level, left to our own devices, God's created order, which was originally ordered and made very good, becomes hopelessly corrupt and ultimately destroyed if God is not with us. So, traditional Christian theology states very clearly why we need God because, without God, we are not whole, but in answering the question of why we need God, a much bigger question is asked and that question is "Does God need us?" Does God, the Creator of heaven and earth need us human beings? Now, on some levels, it is a very dangerous question to ask. In answering that question, we need to be very humble in our lack of God. We need to be honest and sober about our own sinfulness, and we need to always remember that God is the Creator and we are the creation. So, with humility and honesty and clarity, does God need us? Absolutely! Absolutely, God needs us!

Scripture tells us that God placed God's image in us, in the creation. God's image is in us like God. We are male and female. Story after story is about how we are to be holy people, a blessing to the nations. We are to be the light to the world and the salt of the earth. We are to go into the world and preach the Good News. God needs a Christ community. He needs us to be the Christ community to the world, for the world, and in relationship with the world. All of this, biblically speaking, is for the purpose that God's intent for the world will come to fruition, that God's kingdom will take shape on earth so we are sent out, in traditional Christian language, to evangelize—that is, to bring others to the faith. We are called to be holy people who dedicate our lives distinctly to God and to model holiness to the world. We are to work and speak out for a better social order. We are to relieve suffering and injustice in the world, and

we are always called as part of God's work to be in prayer, to be in communion spiritually with God, and that would be a part of lives—being "in sync" with God so that we can understand and live out God's will on earth.

So, when we make claims that Jesus, Emmanuel, is God With Us, it is a hope-filled statement because it affirms and proclaims that we are not alone. We are not in the world alone. God is with us is the promise and the gift of Jesus Christ and His birth and is living on through the Holy Spirit. We are not in this alone. God has not spun off the world to see how we can do without God. We are, in that sense, not deists. God is with us in our struggles. God is not indifferent to the world or separate from it. God is with us through everything.

I go back again and again, and I love that vision of the Israelites in bondage in slavery in Egypt, and the text there says that they cried out. They didn't cry out to God. They just cried out in suffering, and the text says in Exodus that God heard their cries.

In Jesus Christ, God hears us. God hears our cries. The pains that we have brought to this sanctuary this morning that we are holding very dear and very close and are very painful in our lives, God is with us in those pains because God loves us. We can feel those pains and struggle with those pains and know that we are not alone in our suffering. God is with us. It is the Good News of the season that God sent his Son, Jesus, to be with us in our struggles and to be with us in our joys.

So, we have to think this claim and live this claim of God being with us with humility because it can quickly translate into God is with us only, that it is an exclusive claim just for God's favored ones. This is not how Jesus came to the world. Jesus came to be with all people. God's revelation is made in the world in unbelievable ways, some of which we are privy to and some which we are not.

We are the beneficiaries of God's love through Jesus who is with us. In Advent, during the Christmas season, we proclaim that the spirit of Jesus Christ is with us, calling us to be partners with God, for we need God and God needs us. God is in partnership with us. We are co-creators of God's movement in the world. We have a responsibility in our relationship with God that we call a covenantal relationship. God calls us to do incredible things, to live incredible lives, and to share God's love in incredible ways.

This Christmas season is really, first and foremost, about the proclamation that we are not alone in this world. God is walking with us. God's spirit envelopes us. God's love makes us whole, and we are called to share that love with the world. Jesus is Emmanuel, God With Us, and we celebrate and give thanks to God for God's love and peace and for God's hope and joy in our lives. Amen.