

Mooretown Presbyterian Churches

December 18, 2022

Fourth Sunday of Advent: Love



God calls us to worship

Advent reading and candle lighting (*Insert*)

Song: **A candle is burning, a candle of love,
a candle to point us to heaven above.
A baby for Christmas, a wonderful birth,
for Jesus is bringing God's love to our earth.**

We respond in praise, confession, and supplication

Prayer of Praise:

Emmanuel, God with us,
We praise you for your presence
throughout the amazing universe you have made.
The shining stars sing your praise which echoes in the depth of space.
The smallest snowflake and a baby's tiny fingers reflect your intricate love
for the details of each and every life.
In Jesus Christ, you were born among us,
one of a kind, yet one with a kind,
to show us how your great love is lived out day by day.
Inspire us with your loving Spirit
as we move through Advent toward Christmas Day,
so that our celebrations of love made flesh in Jesus
will share the presence of your love with those who need it most.
So may we live the praise we offer to you,
Emmanuel, God with us, now and evermore.

Prayer of Confession (Unison):

**Lord of love,
we confess we sometimes find your love daunting.
You called Joseph to honour his love for Mary,
even when custom called him to break his engagement.
We confess custom has a hold on us, too.
You call us to love our neighbour,
but we resist your call if our neighbours annoy us.
You call us to love our enemies,
but that seems impossible.
Forgive us for loving only when it doesn't cost us.
Dare us to love as Jesus loved.
For the sake of your kingdom,
and in the name of Jesus, Amen.**

Assurance of pardon:

Receive the Good News in love. With great mercy, God forgives what we have confessed and offers us new life in Christ. Know that God's steadfast love is yours this day, and share that love with friend and enemy alike, so that the power of such love can change the world.

Hymn: #123 "My soul gives glory"

God speaks to us

Readings: Isaiah 7:10-16
Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19 (*read responsively*)

Choir anthem (St. Andrew's): "He comes!"

Readings: Matthew 1:18-25

Emmanuel

1. Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man.

Dikaios.

It means that he lived rightly in the eyes of God. He lived in accordance with the statutes and ordinances of the covenant that God had made with his ancestors. He worshipped God. He prayed to God. He learned, trusted, and obeyed God's laws. Even though, like us, Joseph couldn't see God, he chose to live *with* God.

Because of that association, his sense of awareness was tuned to God. So, he recognized that his dream was not simply the product of an over-active imagination, nor was it the result of an undigested bit of beef as Ebenezer Scrooge thought when confronted by the spirits, but rather was God's method of communicating with him by way of the angel.

Joseph believed in God.

He was a righteous man.

On this fourth Sunday of Advent during which we light the candle of love, I want us to consider another 4-letter word that is not love but which is inseparably woven into the tapestry that is love: *With*.

With is a preposition

With brings things together. It brings things into relationship.

With connects things.

For example, apple pie is a good dessert. Vanilla ice cream is a good dessert. Apple pie *with* vanilla ice cream is an association in which there is a harmony of different yet complementary flavours, textures, temperatures, and aromas. Both parts come together to create a delightful desert.

2. Human beings have been made to be *with* other people, and *with* the animals, and *with* the plants, and *with* all of nature and *with* all of the created cosmos.

All those relationships have their Genesis in a harmonious relationship with God.

Joseph chose to be *with* Mary and the consequence of that new relationship is the promise of peace for all generations. The consequence of that new association is that Mary and Jesus would be protected and cared for, and that Jesus would be raised in the family line of David as befitting the Messiah who is the anointed King who would bring to completion God's promises of salvation. Yet the relationship had had its genesis in the decision Joseph had previously made to live his life *with* God.

St. Augustine is credited with saying: "Thou hast made me for thyself, O Lord, and my heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee."

We have been made to be with God, to be in communion and harmony with our Creator.

As long as we remain separated from God, we are at risk, on some level, of absorbing and propagating the anxiety, distrust, fear, jealousy, and self-interest that surrounds us and thus never being able to fully connect with people in a way that fosters harmony that endures.

It's not by accident that the commandments dealing with loving the Lord your God with all your body, mind, and emotions come before the ones dealing with loving your parents and neighbours! Love of people is the consequence of love of God.

3. God chose to come to be *with* us in the Child born in Bethlehem. He has chosen to “let his face shine”; to rescue us, to reconcile us with himself and thus in that new association to heal us, and to reconstitute our fragmented parts – within ourselves and in our other relations.

*Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means ‘God is **with** us.’¹*

It’s worth noting that the Gospel according to Matthew both opens and closes with the use of that preposition. At the end of the gospel, as Jesus commissioned his disciples to go to all the world and baptize all nations and teach them to obey all that Jesus has commanded, the very last thing he said, the thing which Matthew wanted to echo through the ages after all the singing and story-telling is over was:

*Remember, I am **with** you, even to the end of the age.²*

Everything that happens between chapters 1 and 28; between Christ’s birth and his ongoing influence in the life of his church even today is framed by the promise that is imbedded in that word: *with*.

God chooses to be *with* us. *Emmanuel*.

¹ Matthew 1:23, quoting Isaiah 7:14.

² Matthew 28:20.

4. Advent provides the opportunity for us to sit with this gospel and to believe. To believe in angels and the spiritual realm; to believe that there is a God who, although we cannot see Him, is real, good, living, and able. Advent invites us to believe that this God chooses to be *with* us. He has chosen to put in place what is needed to restore the relationship and bring together the fragmented and anxious parts of society to create instead an association in which there is hope, peace, joy, and love.

What is required of us, of first importance, is that we, like Joseph, receive God's grace in Jesus Christ, give Him our hearts, and choose – in worship, service, and obedience – to be with the One who chooses to be with us.

From that place of peace, by the power of the Holy Spirit and the grace of God, we may then be the non-anxious presence of Christ in a very anxious world.

For the good of our souls, the health of our societies, and the glory of God.

Amen.

We respond by affirming our faith, offering our tithes, and prayer:

Hymn: #134 "Lord, you were rich"

The Apostle's Creed (*insert*)

Offering:

(*Offering plates are presented at the Communion Table while congregation sings:*)

**Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
praise him all creatures here below;
praise him above, ye heavenly host;
praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost**

Prayer of dedication

Prayers of thanksgiving, intercession, and the Lord's Prayer:

Come, Christ Jesus,
be a guest in our hearts and our homes this Christmas.
Enter our lives today with your blessing.
We are grateful for the wonder you bring
into a world so full of complaint and criticism.
Draw near to us in friendship and faithfulness,
so that in this season of celebration,
we may know your presence.

Come, Christ Jesus,
be our guide through the darkening days and the chill of winter.
Show us the way to wisdom and gratitude.
We are thankful for the kindness we know
in friends and good neighbours, in warm houses and warm smiles.
Encourage us to reach out to those who need your embrace and ours.

Come, Christ Jesus,
be our hope in the uncertain times in which we find ourselves.
Touch us with your healing and grace.
We remember before you those we know and those known to you alone
who are living with loss or illness this season,
those who face depression or discouragement,
and any who will find it hard to be merry this year.

Keep silence for 15-20 seconds.

Shine the light of your courage and comfort into their lives.

Come, Christ Jesus,
be our king and claim your rightful place in our hearts.
Our world is struggling for the justice and mercy you bring.
Draw near to all leaders and all citizens working for peace and justice.
Encourage honourable action and co-operation on all sides.
Give hope to people under oppression
and those who live with fear or hunger day by day.
Hasten the day when the world's peoples will live as neighbours,
reconciled in your truth and freedom.

With voices united in love and loyalty, we offer the prayer you taught us:

The Lord's Prayer

God sends us with God's blessing:

Hymn: #133 "Go, tell it on the mountain"

Benediction

Congregational Amen