

Christmas Eve 2018
Rev. Alida Ward
'God With Us'

So, I was down at the gym the other day --
not that important a detail, I just like saying that --
So there I was at the gym
and I'm sitting at one of the weight machines and next to me these two weightlifting
guys are having a conversation –
people who can talk while grunting always impress me.
And one of the guys is talking about a tough situation at work,
and the other one, I notice, is doing a *really* good job of listening,
I'm impressed.
And what he keeps saying, as he nods and listens,
is "yeah, man, I feel you."
"That's really tough what you're dealing with. I feel you."

And I started thinking about that phrase, which is a very 21st century phrase.
I feel you.
That's a good phrase, I thought.
It conveys a depth of empathy –
It says I've heard you, and I ache with you.
It says, what you're going through, well, I feel it.
I feel you.

So now I'm just sitting there at the weight machine, thinking about all this -- not really
lifting weights anymore , big surprise –
And I start thinking "Huh -- *I feel you* is kind of the perfect Christmas phrase."
I thought of turning to those two guys and telling them why I thought that,
but I sensed that would be weird.
So I'll just tell YOU why.

It's because *I feel you* is what God says to the world at Christmas.
It's what God chose to say to the world two thousand years ago
in a crummy little stable
in the little town of Bethlehem
When God decided that the best way to be God was to be one of us.
To hurt with us, to laugh with us, to wonder and learn and love with us.

The Incarnation, God born among us,
Emmanuel, God with us, was the ultimate *I feel you*.
The ultimate act of empathy.
God wanting to truly to know us,
God wanting us to know that God is always with us.
I feel you, God says on Christmas.
Emmanuel.
God with us.

So now, if *I feel you* is the Christmas phrase I want you to remember,
what I'm about to share with you is the Christmas *story* I want you to remember.

Five months ago, in July, in Thailand
12 teenage boys were trapped in a cave,
trapped while waters rose around them.
You remember.
They were all on the same soccer team together, these boys,
and they were tight friends,
and they were all celebrating the birthday of one of their teammates.
And in a burst of energy and excitement,
they decided to go out to the caves in the mountains near their village,
caves that everyone knew about,
caves that they'd been in many a time before.
Their young soccer coach went with them.

You remember what happened.
It wasn't a good time of year to go into the caves.
It was the beginning of the rainy season,
and the caves had already started filling with water.
The boys went in, way in, to a place in the cave they knew ...
and the waters rushed in behind them.
Hours later, their frantic parents
found their bikes piled at the mouth of the cave,
and they knew right away what had happened.
And they called the police,
and the police tried to go in but there was no way through the waters,
And the police called the army,

and they put the word out to the world.
And experts in cave rescue gathered from around the world,
at the mouth of the cave.
And soon rescue divers went into the waters of the cave,
diving deeper and deeper, exploring through the vast web of tunnels.
And on the ninth day the boys were found.
Alive, miraculously alive, a mile inside the mountain.
Huddled together on a ledge in total darkness,
after nine days of no food, no light, they were alive.
The boys were found, and the world rejoiced.

But how to get them out?
Between the boys and the outside world was that mile of tunnels
now completely filled with water.
Meanwhile, in the cave where the boys were still stuck,
the oxygen levels were dropping lower and lower.

Most of what happened next the whole world knows.
After a week of planning,
an extraordinary group of divers went in, and one by one
each strapped one of the boys to themselves,
put an oxygen mask on them
and swam them back
through the dark waters, through the milelong waters to freedom.

Here's the part of the story you probably don't know.
During that long week,
while the experts were trying to figure out how to get the kids out,
one man decided to go in.
To be with them, to be with the boys.
Dr. Richard Harris,
an Australian doctor,
was worried about the boys -- about their health,
about how they were doing not just physically but emotionally.
And yes, they were getting food supplies,
and yes, they knew people were trying to get them out,
but they were still alone in there.

And young and scared.
So Dr. Harris dove in. Swam through the tunnels to the ledge where they were.
And stayed there.
For all those days while the outside world was drawing up maps and plans to get the kids out,
Dr. Harris was with them.
In that dark cave,
where the oxygen levels were slowly dropping,
he was with them.
He told them stories to keep their spirits up,
he made them laugh,
like them, he curled up on that rock ledge to sleep,
like them, he sat in the darkness.
And he told them he wouldn't leave until salvation came.
And he didn't.
He stayed right there in the cave,
until, days later, all the boys had been carried out.
And then, only then, he went through the waters himself.
Dr. Richard Harris was the last one out.

And that is a Christmas story.
Because what Dr. Harris did for those boys,
well, that's what God did for us on Christmas.
Came to us in the darkness and stayed with us.
Came to be with us,
so that we would go through nothing alone.
Just as Dr. Harris chose to enter into the cave to be with those children.
God chose to enter into this world
bearing hope, bringing love,
and most of all: simply being with us.
God with us, Emmanuel.

I feel you, says God.
I am with you, says God.
Wherever you are, in sunshine or darkness,
in laughter or hurt,
in comfort or worry.

I am with you says God.

Born in a stable,
cradled in a manger,
worshiped by shepherds,
adored by Kings,
God entered the darkness to make it light.
So let the heavens rejoice, let the angels sing.
God is with us. God is with us!
And we are never alone.

*Let's join our hearts together now in prayer.
Let us pray.*