

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: December 24, 2018
Sermon Title: Emmanuel
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: A Christmas Eve Litany

TOGETHER: God sent an angel to Mary in Nazareth who said, "Greetings! The Lord is with you . . . you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins . . ." This took place to fulfill what God had promised through the Prophet Isaiah, that a virgin will give birth to a son who shall be Emmanuel—which means 'God with us.'

(Matthew 1:26-31; Luke 1:22-23; Isaiah 7:14)

Pastor: Holy God,
We may ask You to be with us.
But we also try to keep our distance.
You embarrass us.
Your hopes are too high.
Your expectations are too great.
Your vision is too perfect.
Your demands are too much.
Your faith is too strong.
And we are not.
Forgive us.
And don't give up on us.

Congregation: **O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.**
Emmanuel—which means "God with us"—
Yes, be with us.
Be with us in Church.
Be with us at home.
Be with us in school, or vacation.
Be with us at work, or retirement.
There
Be with us in thought, word, and deed.

**Be with us when storms are raging,
or the sun is shining.
Be with us, just be with us.**

Pastor: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.

Congregation: **Be our Good Shepherd,** *(John 10:11)*

Pastor: caring for us with unconditional love, never letting go

Congregation: **Be our Savior, our Rock, our Refuge,**
(Luke 2:11; Psalm 18:2; Psalm 46:1)

Pastor: the one who is always there, to whom we can always turn;

Congregation: **Be our Light of the World, our Prince of Peace,**

Pastor: guiding us to that universal dream come true;

Congregation: **Be our Bread of Life, our Living Water,**
(John 16:32; John 4:10)

Pastor: the everlasting nourishment that never weakens.

Congregation: **Be our Rose of Sharon,
our Lily of the Valley** *(Song of Solomon 2:1)*
our Bright and Morning Star,
(Revelation 22:16)

Pastor: the Alpha and Omega of all that is true beauty;
(Revelation 1:8)

Congregation: **Be our Word made flesh, dwelling among us,**
(John 1:1)

Pastor: Be our Emmanuel: God with us. Amen.

The debate about God is fascinating, especially for someone of my generation because it really has evolved. Years ago it was pretty simple: Atheists said to believers, "You're an idiot." Believers said to atheists, "You're going to hell." End of discussion. Nowadays, it's far more nuanced. People I know are far more interested, and willing, to tell you what they think and why and far more willing to talk it through. Every great leap forward in social consciousness goes through a period of dramatic, passionate, aggressive attack mode before finally learning, "Hey, let's talk . . . and listen."

I used to smoke a pipe back in the day when you smoked everywhere: on planes, in classrooms, at work, and then, around the early 80s or so, the stop-smoking movement began in earnest. And those people meant it!

I was living in Queens, and one day, I was walking to a subway station, headed to the famous "30 Rock" to tape my radio show on "Religion and Rock 'n Roll." But at that moment, I was on the sidewalk, smoking a pipe, and this woman comes up to me and shoves the pipe down my throat! Literally smashed the pipe in my face, down my throat!

I'm a slow learner: next week, same place, different pipe, same woman . . . But this time she grabs the pipe and throws it across Queens Boulevard, which, if you've driven it, you know that's an impressive throw. I never smoked in public again.

Well, that's how atheists and believers used to be—ready to shove it down your throat or throw you across Queens Boulevard. Nowadays, at least recently, the debate is more earnest. My last two books have had substantial chapters on atheism and belief, so tonight I'll take a new direction.

God, or no God? There are sort of two ways to answer. One, it's up to God to prove it, to show up, do something, be compelling. Two, it's up to us to prove it, to show up, do something, be compelling.

As you've already figured out, our whole Christmas Eve theme tonight is "Emmanuel." The angel told Mary that her Baby Jesus would be our "Emmanuel, God with us." So the choir sang about it, we just sang about it, and I forced you to do that whole responsive reading that had the phrase over and over again: God with us, God with us, God with us. Emmanuel, Emmanuel. God with us.

That's a big deal because up until then God was a disembodied what? A concept, an idea; something up there, out there, ethereal. One of the Ten Commandments was loud and clear. God said, "Thou shalt not make any graven image, no idols, don't make me into anything, out of anything. Don't make me. Period. I am 'unmakeable.'"

Or, as MC Hammer said (now there's a cultural reference that shows how hip I am), "You can't touch this." I actually looked up the lyrics.

"You can't touch this.
You can't touch this.
Oh oh, oh oh, oh,oh.
You can't touch this."

Which is sort of God's original persona—majestic, beyond our imagination, untouchable, unknowable. To be feared, for sure. To be worshipped. To be obeyed. But don't get close. All that changes with Christmas. God says, "Here I am. I am with you. Go ahead, you can touch this."

I can make my point for faith in about two sentences. In Jesus, God is saying to us, "Here's the best I can do." In us, God is saying to the world, "Here's the best I can do." Together we are the proof of God . . . or not. Frankly, I find Jesus convincing. And maybe if the whole world, all 6 billion of us, one at a time, had a few hours with Jesus, or a few days, we'd all be convinced.

But just as frankly, what most people know about God or Jesus comes through us. There's an old saying, a song, I think, that says, "Most people will never read the Bible . . . Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, through and through; they'll only read the Gospel according to you." We are Emmanuel . . . or not. We are God with us . . . or not.

Whenever I'm on a college campus, I grab the college newspaper and read the flyers on the bulletin boards. You'd be amazed how much religion is there. At Yale the other day, I picked up the Yale paper and read an excellent, troubling column titled, "God, Found and Lost." Let me try to do it justice: the writer is a first-year student at Yale, a Chinese-American Christian . . . or used to be. Her dad escaped China after the horrors of the Tiananmen Square massacres, came to America, and at a very low point in his life, a little Texas Church opened its arms to him. As time went by, he prospered, had a family, including the Yale student, and during life's ups and downs, Christian faith and the Christian Church were constants in her life: prayer, Bible study, mission trips.

And she writes, "Church didn't abandon us, and I never once doubted God. Until high school. In high school others started questioning her faith. She started questioning herself, and soon, no more Church.

At the end of her column she writes, "I felt guilty because God had lifted us out of dark times only for us to leave [God] after our own hardships passed." She began to wonder if the idea of God had just been some sort of "emotional support," a nonexistent presence" that carried her through her first 16 years but really wasn't there after all; and most of all, Christian faith seemed powerless to "solve real-world problems." It ends, "I held onto that faith for 16 years, yet lost it after a week. I haven't found it yet [and] I don't know if I ever will."

If I ever meet with her, I would be tender, as she herself is tender and earnest in her struggle with God, or no God. I would share her earnest belief that God was at work in that little Church that welcomed her dad and embraced her family—that Church was Emmanuel, God with us, God with her, when it counted.

And I would share her earnest disappointment when Christianity chooses—I say, “chooses”—to be powerless. And then I would empower her to be “Emmanuel,” to be the presence of God, to be the proof of God because every day of her life, on college campus, in the dorm, on Christmas break back home, and after college out in the world, every day there will be people who will know God through her or not.

Yes, that’s what I’m saying, we are God’s “Emmanuel,” or not.