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Date: August 16, 2020
Sermon: "God WITH Us"
Scripture Litany: Emmanuel, God With Us
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Scripture Litany: Emmanuel, God With Us

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. (John 1)

And his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, Almighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6)

And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well-pleased." (Matthew 3:17)

He was despised and rejected, a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief. We considered him stricken, struck down by God. He was pierced for our transgressions, and by his wounds we are healed. (Isaiah 53)

The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. (Psalm 118)

You shall name him Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins. And he shall be called Emmanuel, which means God With Us. (Luke 2)

I and [God] the Father are One. (John 10:30)

He has been given a name above every other name . . . that every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. (Philippians. 2:9)

Simon Peter said to him, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." (Matthew 16:16)

I went away to boarding school at age 13. I'd just been baptized in Brooklyn a few months earlier, so I arrived as a newly minted Christian at Mt. Hermon School for Boys, a prep school founded by America's most famous Christian,

D. L. Moody. When my parents dropped me off, they gave me two gifts. First, an envelope with \$5 spending money for the first semester with the promise that if all went well, I'd get another \$5 for the second semester.

And they gave me a picture of Jesus, about five by seven in a frame, for my desk. As days went by, the picture of Jesus began moving. One day it was on its back; another day, upside down, then it moved to the top of the dresser drawer. Eventually, it disappeared, showing up in my dirty laundry or buried beneath clean clothes or hidden behind books.

I was enough of a Christian to know Jesus was capable of surprising things. I knew about the Virgin Birth, walking on water, being raised from the dead, but a mystical side I didn't know about, yet. Eventually, I confronted my roommate, who was smarter than I, bigger, meaner, so I just sort of said, "What's up?" To which he said, "You haven't noticed? That Jesus of yours, his eyes follow me everywhere, no matter where I put him, and when I started moving him, he looks angry. It freaks me out. Get rid of it."

Well, we decided to test it together. And sure enough, whenever you put Jesus in our room, he was watching you. Which is probably what my parents intended. We moved him every which way. And what's more, a lot of times he did look angry. I convinced my roommate it was best to make peace with Jesus, put him back on my desk, let him be. And so it was.

That was my introduction to a deeper Jesus. My childhood Church was very much like ours—a nice Church, 100 percent nice people. Even the mean people were nice. And our Jesus was super-nice. But suddenly, in my 13th year, in my freshman dorm room, I learned that there are people who don't like Jesus, who were freaked out by his interest in us; and introduced to the mystical side of Jesus, when things happen you're not sure about. And I saw my own need to blend fear, tradition, respect, and love together in some coherent theology.

Jump ahead 60 years, and now I'm deep into writing my next book, simply called *My Jesus*. I started it last year in a sidewalk café in Paris and was supposed to finish it this summer in Prague and Bratislava, my usual writing haunts. I call it *My Jesus* because truth is, the world is full of ideas about him.

There's a new book about Jesus published every four days, can you imagine? And my guess is most everyone who takes faith even half-seriously has some version of their own Jesus. People present him as everything from violent revolutionary to ardent pacifist. To be honest, there are people who make my skin crawl whenever they talk about Jesus. Their usurpation and exploitation of Jesus is so ugly. And there are people whose emulation of Jesus is so inspiring,

you want to join them. Brighter minds than mine have said, "We each see in Jesus what we need to see."

Alida told me the other day that I put a lot more emphasis on Jesus on the Cross. She talks more of the Resurrection and the light, as she did last Sunday. Certainly, if you came to me to bare your soul, to tell me your misdeeds, I'd for sure tell you about Jesus on the Cross, dying for your sins.

And if you told me about your wedding or your child's wedding upended by the Covid-19 shutdown, I'd for sure tell you about Jesus's saving the wedding in Cana to help out a young couple. So, yes, there are many facets to Jesus. And at this stage of my life, I wanted to lay out "My Jesus," the Jesus of my life and experience.

But first, I needed to wade through everybody else's Jesus. Two thousand years of how people talked and thought about him. Everything that's been around a long time is likely to go through rethinking and revising. Languages, for example. Or Confederate generals. Stalin. FDR. The British Empire. Fossil fuels. Movie theaters. And yes, Jesus. The rethinking of Jesus began in earnest in the 1800s and exploded with Albert Schweitzer with his book, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*. Everybody and their dog came up with a new way to define Jesus. Here's a sample list.

I'll begin with the most esoteric:

Jesus is
Romantic universality
Mythologized moralist
Apocalypse-obsessed madman
A wandering cynic sage
Ardent feminist
Failed political revolutionary
Upsetter of apple carts
Magician
Cult leader
Hallucinogenic
Shaman
Divine idiot savant
Pan-Mediterranean Carpenter
A simple Rabbi
An early Gary Cooper

Maybe a little closer to home is the next bunch:

Jesus is
The turning point in history

Cosmic Christ
King of Kings
Son of Man
Light of the Gentiles
The true image
The monk who ruled the world
The model exemplar
Universal man
Prince of Peace
Teacher of common sense
Liberator
Miracle worker, prophet
The man who belongs to the world

Then there are my three favorites:

 Jesus is
Bridegroom of the soul
Poet of the spirit
Mirror of the eternal

All this is in addition to classic Christian terminology:

 Jesus is
The Messiah, the Savior of the world. He is the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity. "The Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world."

The Apostles' Creed lays out some basics:

"Born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. On the third day, he rose from the grave, he ascended into heaven, and from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead."

There is the full range. They are all attempts to make sense of that "One Solitary Life" that has caught the whole world's attention.

My book is my attempt to tell what Jesus has meant to this "solitary life." And so, in 10 chapters so far, I take you on a journey: from childhood to deep theology, from the Bible to folks who reject Jesus, from experiences around the world to right here in our little Church.

I devote more than one chapter to "What if I'm wrong?" What if the nice, loving, "What a friend we have in Jesus" Jesus is exaggerated? And there really is a roaring fire of eternal damnation waiting for those who don't have it all just right? I look at what Jesus teaches, and I look at what it means for you and me to claim his name as our own.

We are Christians, Christians by choice. We are known by our allegiance to Jesus the Christ. But what does that mean? I could easily give you a list of 10 people who claim allegiance to Jesus that would shame and embarrass and infuriate you. And I can give another 10 that you would follow anywhere. It's up to us to put meaning into Jesus's name. He did his part. Now it's our turn.

All in all, this sermon is a plug for our "Autumn/Advent Devotional." Each year our Church members write a daily devotional that takes us from Thanksgiving to New Year's Day. Each year I pick a theme, say, "Joy" or "Peace" or "Nature," and I find about 30 Bible verses on that theme, and they surround about 15 of the main Christmas verses: the angels, shepherds, Wise Men, Mary and Joseph, even the innkeeper with no room. Together they provide 40 to 45 days of inspiration.

This year I made two decisions. First, we were going to start earlier. That's why it's the "Autumn/Advent Devotional. We need daily inspiration sooner rather than later. We're not waiting until Thanksgiving.

Second, I picked just two verses: Psalm 134, "This is the day the Lord hath made; let us rejoice and be glad in it!" (which I preached on a couple of weeks ago) and today's verse, where the angel defines Jesus as "Emmanuel," which means "God with us," which is today's sermon.

What I invite you to think about—those doing the writing, those listening today—think about the presence of God during these turbulent months, the promise of God, that belief, that reason for Jesus in the first place is to be "God with us."

How has that happened for you? And if not, then what? Let's help it happen. Think again about our Scripture. An angel appeared to Mary, then to Joseph, announcing that something extraordinary, extra-ordinary (which literally means "out of the ordinary"), was going to happen to them as a family. They were going to have a baby beyond the norm, in some sort of mystical spiritual union with God.

Then, the angel gave Joseph two instructions: one, the baby was to be named "Jesus" because he would "save us from our sins." By some direct action of his life, we humans would be saved from our sins.

However old you think the world is, religion is that old. Religion of one kind or another has been around forever. And mostly all those religions existed for two reasons. To curry favor with God. To get God on our side, to grant us some favor: crops, babies, victories.

The other reason was to stop God from being angry and punishing us for our sins. So when the angel says Jesus wipes away our sins, that is huge. We all live with some form of regret, or guilt over something that leaves us feeling separated from God, at odds with ourselves, upset, broken, sorry.

The first promise of Christmas is Jesus takes that away. The second promise is tailor-made for our current lives, when so much is disrupted, tumultuous, uncertain, fearful, worrying. The promise is that Jesus will also be known as "Emmanuel," with the angel explaining that Emmanuel means "God with us."

This is every bit as revolutionary as saving us from our sins. Again, from the standpoint of world religions since the dawn of creation, God is up there, somewhere, out there, somewhere, beyond us, either too holy to have anything to do with us, or too fed up, too remote to be bothered with us. To paraphrase Chevy Chase, "I'm God, and you're not. Get over it."

For Alida and me, this week was filled with sorrow. Alida steered dozens and dozens of teenagers through the tragic death of a Fairfield boy in a car accident, their football and lacrosse teammate, their Ludlowe High School classmate, and their all-around good guy friend. And so Alida sat with them around the fire pit behind the barn, listening, weeping, and guiding. Many of them went into the sanctuary, where they lit a candle, said a prayer, sat in these pews to write a letter to the boy's parents. Altogether they experienced, shared, and became God's presence.

Suddenly, we're told that God chooses to be with us. One of us. One with us. Everything else about Jesus is designed to hammer home that point: God chooses to be with us. The result, the Bible tells us, is "the peace which passeth all understanding."

We are inviting you to be thinking of how and where and when we felt God's presence these six months of national crisis. And many of you, I hope, will volunteer to write a brief devotional. Tell us how that verse, "God with us," is true in your life.

For me, I prepared a "Celebration of Life" for 18 elderly residents of the Sturges Ridge Home who died during this shutdown. One family member told of how it broke her heart not to be able to be with her loved one during the shutdown, the illness, the dying, and the death. She tried everything—phone and iPhone; FaceTiming didn't work, praying the rosary didn't work; finally she began to meditate, to imagine being together, holding hands. She could actually feel her loved one's hand in hers. What was that? Creative visualization? Mind games? Power of suggestion? Or positive thinking? Answered prayer? Who knows? Who

cares? It worked. God was "with" them. They found that "peace which passes all understanding."

I had another childhood picture of Jesus standing before a large wooden door, knocking on it. Based on the Bible verse "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone opens the door, then I will come in and dine with them." (Revelation 3:20)

Again, he has done his part. Now it's our turn.

Let's conclude with Hymn No. 585, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus":

*What a friend we have in Jesus,
all our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
all because we do not carry
everything to God in prayer!*

*Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged;
take it to the Lord in prayer!
Can we find a friend so faithful
who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness;
take it to the Lord in prayer!*

*Are we weak and heavy laden,
cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Savior, still our refuge--
take it to the Lord in prayer!
Do your friends despise, forsake you?
Take it to the Lord in prayer!
In his arms he'll take and shield you;
you will find a solace there.*