

December 23, 2020

Matthew 1:22-25

Pastor Katya Brodbeck - Powell United Methodist Church

”The best of all, God is with us”

Since I did not grow up in the United States of America, every year in the last four to five years the season of Advent and Christmas is a “season of firsts” for me. What I mean by that is that for the first time in my life I watch or do things that an average Christian or perhaps not even christian here in states does during Christmas. So last year I watched “The Grinch” for the first time. I baked and decorated Christmas cookies for the first time. This year I built gingerbread houses for the first time! Josh ordered a kit of a whole gingerbread village on Amazon the night I told him that I have never built gingerbread houses before. Christmas movies are a biggy! Of course my dear colleagues and friends on staff, including Larry, have really strong suggestions on what Christmas movies I am to watch. I have to admit, Larry, I still have not watched White Christmas. I promise I will do it this year.

But what I want to share with you is that I watched Charlie Brown Christmas, just the other day, yes, I watched it for the first time. What struck me in this movie, well, first how weird it is haha All the strange characters and all those dance moves. No, really, what struck me is how what they share in that story is true for us in 2020 as well. Some of us, like Charlie Brown, do feel Christmas blu. With everything that is going, with no ability to go places, to go to a mall and get your christmas mood on, get together with a friend for a lunch at a local restaurant, not being able to gather with loved ones this year. With so much suffering around us with covid, political uncertainty, with our own grief and loss that this state of things brings to us, I do feel like Charlie Brown.

“I think there must be something wrong with me, Linus,” he says. “Christmas is coming, but I'm not happy. I don't feel the way I'm supposed to feel.” He says.

And friends, since when there is a certain way or mood we all are supposed to feel at Christmas? Who told us that we are supposed to be all jolly and happy? As far as the Christmas story is concerned that is depicted in Matthew’s Gospel, we do not see any excitement or happiness. Matthew’s nativity is more dark if you will, than Luke’s nativity. I know we did not read the whole story today, but we did it last Sunday. But I will remind you that in those verses we see Joseph, who is afraid of what would happen to this baby, to Mary, to him, and to his marriage. We see uncertainty and anxiety for what the future holds for him. We see Joseph with his head spinning with questions. How exactly Mary got pregnant? How exactly will this plan come about with this baby, conceived of the Holy Spirit? How is he going to bring this baby up?

You see, we are so used to the nativity scene being so perfect and happy. Singing angels, the joy of the shepherds hasting to see the baby Jesus. Mary all dressed in a beautiful blue dress with rosy cheeks. Joseph with a kind and humble smile. All that presents us with such a beautiful

story that is told in Luke's Gospel. But if we only had Matthew's Gospel, our Christmas would be so much different. Well, definitely, the Christmas pageants would! There will be far less roles to play: Mary, Joseph, an Angel, and well, the Three Kings that rightfully belong here because they are not in Luke's Gospel. If we had only Matthew's Gospel, there would be uncertainty, questions, and no excitement.

You see the way we portray nativity is kind the same way we try to act at Christmas. We try to make this season as happy and perfect as we can. We put decorations, lights, and make tasty dinners. And buy tons and tons of gifts to make our families happy. And rightfully so. There is nothing bad in all of those things. But like Charlie Brown, we sometimes forget the reason for the season. Just the other day I read an article by Sarah Bessy, a modern Christian writer, and she wonders and I wonder with her, if we look deeply, it almost like we want Jesus to enter into this world and pretend that it is perfect. It's almost like we cannot allow God, who is all powerful and almighty, whose glory we will not be able to handle and see, the God who is all perfect and loving, to enter our world as it is, broken, and hurting, and dark sometimes.

But God did not come into this world to be with us because we are perfect, it is exactly the opposite. God comes to be with us as we are, broken, hurting, and lonely. Jesus came to be with us just as we are. And Jesus comes because we need him! We need his comforting and guiding presence. Moreover, we need the presence of the one who knows how it feels to be human. The one who experienced life as we all experience it, with ups and downs, with joy and sorrow, frustration and celebration, deep suffering and exhilarating joy. We all need Emmanuel, God with us. And in Matthew's nativity scene in the midst of uncertainty and fear, Matthew quotes Isaiah reminding Joseph that God would not leave him, that God would be with him even in the midst of all of this.

As I was reading and researching for today's passage, I came across an article by David Lose who writes commentaries and sermon helps for preachers. This was something that really spoke to me. He writes:

God comes "to be with us as we are. Not as we know we should be, or are trying to be, or have promised to be, or will be some day, but with us as we are now...today...in this moment. Perhaps that's the promise at the heart of this passage – that as God came before to be with, use, accept, and hallow Joseph and Mary at the birth of Christ, so also God comes to us in Christ to be with us, use us for good, accept us as we are, and hallow us by God's own presence. Yes, God is really with us. Yes, God is with us, really and truly as we are. Yes, this is our Emmanuel."

Yes, friends this is our Emmanuel and God is with us as the state of this world and the state of our soul is. God does not mind entering into this messy reality and being here with us. Maybe after all it is not bad to acknowledge that we are not feeling Christmas cheer this year, just like Charlie Brown did. Maybe it is not bad to see the reality around us, the truth of where we are. Come out of denial, as we say. Let's be honest! Things will not be perfect this Christmas. Just like they were not perfect the very first Christmas. We will not be able to see some of our beloved family members and friends. Some of us will not be able to be in the church building for our usual Christmas eve service. Perhaps because of the job loss and other financial difficulties,

we will not be able to provide the perfect gifts to our kids and beloved. Some of us will be alone on Christmas.

Last week I talked to our elderly congregation member who lost his spouse recently and a daughter of our congregation friend who is in her late 90s. Both of those beloved saints have been struggling, both acknowledged that it had been lonely and depressing in the last nine months, but for both of them this was true - God is there with them in and through all of this.

Look at the image on the screen:

“And of course, that is the message of Christmas, you are never alone.”

This is the message of Christmas, friends, God is with us in this imperfect world and this imperfect year. God came to us as baby Jesus and made home among us exactly because things are not perfect and because we need him. Jesus came so we know that we are not alone to provide care and love, to let us know we will not be abandoned or forsaken, that in the midst of the difficulties and pain, there is a presence of unconditional love, there is a source of light and hope, that God knows exactly how all of that feels.

When John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist faith was on his deathbed, one of the very last phrases that he uttered was:

“And the best of all, God is with us.”

So this season of Advent and Christmas, however you and I are experiencing it, perhaps because of not so much to do, and the unusual quiet days and nights, there is more space, there is more room to experience the season and for a deeper awareness of God’s presence with us. Let’s discover together what the season is all about, just like, Charlie Brown did. And we can enjoy quiet nights with intentional prayer time, Christmas cookies and gingerbread, beloved Christmas movies and carols, worship services and other Advent activities. But you know what is best, the best of all is that God is with us.