

God With Us

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- [0 : 0 0] Good morning. On April 12th, 1961, Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first human being to enter space and orbit the earth.
- ! This was a momentous event in human history. And if you know the history of that time, you know that it also spurred on the competitive space race between Russia and the United States, and it led to the massive expansion of NASA and ultimately the U.S. landing a man on the moon.
- But the Russian government used this moment to promote some bigger ideas. The Kremlin ended up producing lots of propaganda, including a poster of a picture of a cosmonaut in outer space saying a message, and the message said, there is no God.
- As if to say, we went to outer space, we looked around, we didn't find God, and so therefore that's clear and convincing proof that God does not exist. Were they right?
- Were they right? I think that's a totally fair question. I think for many people in our modern culture, perhaps even for some of you, this is a pretty convincing argument. If you broaden it out that we've, through science, we've looked at the world through empirical observation, and we have yet to find convincing proof of God.
- [1 : 3 7] But this time of year, it's great to sing Christmas carols and spread holiday cheer, but at the end of the day, Christmas isn't a reason to believe in God.
- Now, that's one possible story, but we see another possible story in our gospel passage this morning in Matthew chapter 1, where we are introduced to somebody named Emmanuel.
- Emmanuel, this name that comes from a prophecy in Isaiah chapter 7, a name that means God with us, God with us. And this name, Emmanuel, God with us, is at the very heart of the Advent and Christmas season, and it's at the very heart of the Christian faith.
- And so a question that we have to ask this morning is, which story is true? Is the story that we've looked for God, but yet we haven't found any evidence of him, is that story true?
- Or is the story true that God has come to be with us? And that's what we're going to look at this morning. And also, if that story was true, what difference would it make?
- [2 : 4 7] So we're going to look at this name, Emmanuel, God with us, and we're going to look at these two stories together. So first of all, Emmanuel means God with us. It means God with us.
- In Matthew chapter 1, verses 18 through 21, an angel appears to Joseph and tells him not to be afraid about Mary's pregnancy. Nothing scandalous or immoral has happened, but rather this has all happened through the initiative of the Holy Spirit.
- In verses 22 and 23, the angel says that this is to fulfill the words of the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah chapter 7, behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel.
- Now, many people, I think, in our culture find this to be pretty irrational and implausible. Surely Jesus was a historical figure. He was a good spiritual leader and moral teacher, but he certainly wasn't conceived supernaturally.

He certainly wasn't God. He certainly wasn't God. How could we possibly believe that story? But around the time that Yuri Gagarin, the Russian cosmonaut, went into space for the first time in the early 1960s, there was a professor of ancient literature at Cambridge University by the name of C.S. Lewis.

[4 : 07] And in 1963, Lewis published an essay responding to this claim that the Russians had been to space and confirmed that there is no God.

And in this essay, Lewis writes this, the Russians, I am told, report that they have not found God in outer space. But looking for God or heaven by exploring space would be like reading or seeing all of Shakespeare's plays in the hopes that you find Shakespeare as one of the characters.

If God does exist, he is related to the universe more as an author is related to a play than as one object in the universe is related to one another.

He's saying if you're trying to find God in outer space would be like Hamlet trying to find Shakespeare. Hamlet could never possibly find Shakespeare by exploring and examining his own world.

He would never find him. But that doesn't mean that is not evidence that Shakespeare does not exist. In other words, the claim that there's no empirical proof for God in the world is nowhere near a convincing argument that God does not exist.

[5 : 27] Why on earth would we assume that if God did exist that that is how we would find him? Of course we would never find him like that. For Hamlet, for Hamlet to know Shakespeare, Shakespeare would have to write himself into Hamlet's story.

For Hamlet to know Shakespeare, Shakespeare would have to reveal himself to Hamlet in a personal way. And this is the claim that Christianity makes on the world. It's the claim that Christianity makes on the world at Advent and at Christmas that in the birth of Jesus Christ, God has written himself into our story.

In the birth of Jesus Christ, God has revealed himself. You may say, well, I believe that Jesus was a historical person. I believe that he was a good spiritual and moral teacher.

But I still can't quite believe in God because I don't see the historical evidence. And may I suggest that if that's your view and if that's where you're coming from, perhaps you haven't examined the historical evidence closely enough.

Perhaps you haven't examined all of the historical evidence. Let's just look at one. If we look at the eyewitness accounts of the Gospels, which were reliably recorded and reliably transmitted, we see in the Gospels that lots of people come to Jesus and they don't just receive his teaching, but they actually worship him.

[6 : 53] That some people actually fall down on their knees and worship him as God. And what you need to understand is that this was a completely absurd and an even immoral thing to do in Jewish culture in the first century.

In Jewish culture, it was completely blasphemous to treat another human being as God. Only God could be worshiped. And there were all kinds of traditions and laws that prevented people from treating other people like God.

And what's amazing is that in the Gospels, in no one instance, does Jesus respond and say, hey, you've got the wrong person. You know, you've got the wrong idea.

I'm just a rabbi. I'm just a teacher. I'm not God. Don't worship me. Worship God alone. No, in every instance, he doesn't turn them away, but he accepts it and he worships it. He welcomes it. Which, if you think about it, if he wasn't God, if that wasn't true, Jesus was either a fraud, a complete fraud, or he was a complete narcissist, or he was both.

If you have captured this better than C.S. Lewis in mere Christianity, by the way, I try to limit my C.S. Lewis references to one in most sermons, but sometimes just, you gotta have two.

[8 : 12] This is one of those days. C.S. Lewis, mere Christianity, says, I'm trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Jesus. I'm ready to accept him as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God.

That is the one thing we must not say. A man who is merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic on a level with a man who says he is a poached egg, or else he would be the devil of hell.

You must make your choice. Either this man was and is the son of God, or else a madman and something worse. You can shut him up for a fool. You can spit at him and kill him as a demon.

Or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about him being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us.

He did not intend to. Lewis says, when it comes to Jesus, there's only really three rational responses if you consider the historical evidence. He's either a liar, or he's a lunatic, or he's Lord.

[9 : 27] He's either a complete fraud, he knew who he truly was and completely lied about it to everybody. Or he truly believed that he was God, but he in fact wasn't, which would make him insane.

Or he actually is who he says he is. If the Christmas story is true, it means that Jesus is Emmanuel.

It means that he's God with us. We can't just think of him as a good teacher or spiritual leader, but as someone who has the right to make claims on our lives.

As somebody who deserves our worship and who deserves our obedience in every single aspect of our lives. And so we have to decide, was Jesus a fraud? Was he a narcissist or a liar?

Or was he God? So first of all, Emmanuel means that Jesus is God. Second of all, it means that he is God with us.

[10 : 26] He's God with us. In the Old Testament, it was always a pretty radical thing when people got to be with God, to be in his presence. God appeared to Israel on Mount Sinai with a cloud of fire and an earthquake and the roaring sound of trumpets.

And of course, if you know the Exodus story, no one could even go close to the mountain except for Moses. God told people, if you even touch the mountain, you're gonna die.

Encountering the presence of God in the Old Testament is kind of like dealing with nuclear radiation. To deal with nuclear radiation, you need a lot of preparation. There's a lot of rules that you have to learn, a lot of protocols, and there's a lot of stuff that you have to wear.

You have to have the right credentials. You have to wear a really expensive suit. And if you don't do that, if you become unprepared, it's gonna kill you. And that's what kind of the tabernacle and the temple and the sacrificial system were for Israel.

They were to prepare people, an unholy people, to encounter a holy, radioactive God. There's this line in Lord of the Rings where in the fellowship with the ring, where they're figuring out what to do with the ring and Boromir says, one does not simply just walk into Mordor.

[11 : 48] But one does not simply just walk into the presence of an awesome holy God. He is like radioactive nuclear radiation. His glory will melt your face off.

And yet, and yet, the news of Advent and Christmas is that the God who was so radioactive, the God who was so glorious, the God who was so holy, came into the world.

Came into the world as a baby. This is something I've been thinking about a lot recently because, as many of you know, my wife Molly and I are expecting our first child, which is really exciting.

We're thrilled. We're very excited to be parents. It's a very exciting season in our lives. And so, Advent, as parents who are expecting our first child, Advent has made me think in a new way about the reality of the incarnation.

And in particular, I've been thinking a lot about this question. why, for Jesus, did he have to come as a baby? Why couldn't he have just come as a fully formed adult?

[13 : 02] He still could have been Trinitarian Orthodox, could have still been fully human, fully divine. He could have just come as a 33-year-old adult, showed up on the scene, and done his ministry, and done everything else that he did.

So why did he have to come as a baby? Well, there's a lot that we could say in response to that question. But I think one of the things that we have to say is this.

You know, I think it's a common human experience, whether we're Christian or not, whether we're religious or not, is, how can I know that I'm not alone?

How can I know that God is with me? How can I know that God hasn't abandoned me? Perhaps that's a question that you're wondering this morning as you're coming into worship.

Where is God in this struggle that I'm facing? Where is God in this diagnosis? Where is God when it feels like my life is falling apart?

[14 : 12] Where is God when it feels like the world is falling apart? Where is God? Are we alone ultimately? And I want us to consider the fact that God didn't just show up on the scene as a fully formed human.

He became a baby. There is no one so more vulnerable. There is no one more open. There is no one more accessible.

there is no one who is more completely and totally with you than a baby. For nine months during pregnancy and then for many months after that all babies can do all they know how to do is just be there with you.

They're sleeping they're eating they're crying they're making dirty diapers of course but they're just there. They're there. They're there. What if God came as a baby so that you could know beyond a shadow of a doubt that he's like that with you?

He's just there. He's with you all the time 24-7 night and day every other religion and philosophy says here's what you need to do in order to be with God.

[15 : 37] Here's what you need to do in order to be with the divine. Only Christianity says look at what God did to come and be with you.

Look at what God did to come and be with you. Look at what he did to make himself utterly available to you. Look at what he did to make himself utterly open to you.

The God who revealed himself in radioactive glory on Mount Sinai the God who created the world and the glory of the galaxies and the billions of stars in our universe is here.

He's available. You have access to him by faith. What's so amazing about the incarnation is that we have this rock-solid assurance that God is always with us, that he'll never leave us and he'll never forsake us.

let's look back at those two stories that we talked about in the beginning. Story number one, there's no God. We call this a secular story. If the secular story is true, then in the moments where you feel most alone, in the moments where you feel like I'm incredibly lonely, there's no one with me, if that story is true, then you're right.

- [17 : 02] You are alone. There's no one ultimately with you. Your deepest feelings of being abandoned, your deepest feelings that there's no one with you are right and they're true.
- But if we look at the second story, if the second story is that God has come to be with us in Emmanuel, then when we experience those very same feelings, when we experience those very same emotions that we're alone, there's no one with us, if that story is true, then nothing, nothing could be further from the truth.
- Our deepest sense, our deepest feelings that we feel alone, there's nothing that could be further than the truth because God has promised to always be with us.
- Whether we feel it or not, whether we know it or not, he's there. He's with us. So Jesus, Emmanuel means Jesus is God.
- Emmanuel means Jesus is God with us. And third, and finally, Emmanuel means that Jesus is God with us.
- [18 : 20] He's God with us. Verse 21, the angel says to Joseph, she will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.
- Many Bibles have a footnote, probably yours does, a footnote on that verse that says that Jesus is the Greek name for the word Joshua, the name Joshua, which means the Lord saves.
- Jesus. Why was Jesus born into this world? He was born into the world to save us from our sins, to save us from our sins.
- Now, I think it's worth noting that I think a lot of people in our culture, a lot of modern people, educated, sophisticated, thoughtful people, I think it's fairly narrow-minded, fairly outdated, morally regressive to believe in the doctrine of original sin.
- But I would actually say that sin is the doctrine that our culture needs the most, needs the most. Alexander Solzhenitsyn was a Russian author who was imprisoned and sentenced to work in the gulag in prison camps under the Soviet Union for speaking out against the government.
- [19 : 36] And as he's in prison, he's thinking and writing, and he's writing about how the culture that he lived in believed fundamentally that the dividing line between good and evil ran between groups of people, between this group of people and that group of people.
- And he says, he's reflecting on this, he says, you know, if that were actually true, we would have solved humanity's problems a long time ago. If humanity was divided up between good people and bad people, all we would have to do is just separate the good people from the bad people and then society would flourish.
- And many systems and governments have tried to do that over the years and it has ended horrifically. Solzhenitsyn says, the reason why we haven't been able to solve humanity's basic problems is because the dividing line between good and evil does not run between groups of people.
- He says that it cuts through the heart of every single person. The dividing line of good and evil cuts through the heart of your heart and my heart. If the dividing line between good and evil, if we believe fundamentally that the dividing line runs through groups of people, the oppression and violence and injustice in the world will never stop.
- We'll always have an enemy, it will always be us versus them, but if, if the dividing line between good and evil cuts through the heart of every person. That is our only hope of seeing society healed because it's the most fundamental basis to say, I'm no better than you.
- [21 : 07] I'm not more righteous than you because the evil that exists in the world isn't just out there, it's in here. It's in here. And this is what it means when the Bible talks about sin and it's why Jesus was born.

We all need to be rescued from the same problem and it doesn't matter our race, class, ethnicity, social status, rich, poor, Democrat, Republican. The Bible teaches that we all fall short of God's holy standard of our lives and we've all committed treason against the king of the universe.

We've all, we all owe God a debt that we cannot repay. We are hopelessly and irrevocably lost in our sin. That's the human condition.

But the good news of Christmas is not just that God, that Jesus is God. God. It's that he's God with us. He's God with us.

On the cross, Jesus took the evil that's inside each and every one of us and he placed it on himself so that we can be forgiven and reconciled to God. And this is not just good news for us as individuals, it's good news for the whole world.

[22 : 15] Because if we admit that Jesus was born to save us from what's inside our hearts, then we can't look at someone who's different from us and hate them. We can never truly hate other people.

You know, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, love your enemies. And this isn't a cute phrase on a coffee mug. It's not also an unattainable ethical ideal.

It's a declaration about the only rational response to the grace that we've been given in Christ. Do you see? Do you see this morning that the dividing line between good and evil cuts through your own heart?

And have you trusted in Emmanuel to save you from this condition as your only hope for the forgiveness of sins and for eternal life? Verse 21 tells us that Jesus was born to save us from our sin.

To take down the dividing line of good and evil in your heart and my heart so that you and I might cross lines of class and race and ethnicity and politics and to cross them with love.

[23 : 30] To cross them with love and to bring healing into the world. And to do any different than that is to completely miss what Advent and Christmas are all about. Because this is what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, in our incarnation.

Jesus is Emmanuel. He's God. You can't just treat him as a good moral teacher, a good spiritual teacher. He demands our worship and our obedience. He demands our whole lives.

He's God with us. He's made himself completely open and accessible and available to you so that you can know even in your darkest moments of doubting if you're actually alone so that you can know beyond shadow of a doubt that you're never actually alone, that he's with you, that he'll never leave you or forsake you.

And he's God with us. With us. Sinners in need of a savior. Dorothy Sayers was a 20th century British author and novelist.

She was known for a series of detective crime novels and her main character is a detective named Lord Peter Wimsey. And midway through this detective novel series, Sayers introduces another character in addition to her main character named Harriet Vane who joins up with Lord Peter Wimsey and helps him to solve crimes.

[24 : 53] And as they solve crimes together, these two eventually fall in love. And a lot of the literary critics over the years who have looked at these stories have noticed a pattern that there's a lot of similarities between Harriet Vane and Dorothy Sayers.

Harriet Vane was educated at Oxford, so was Dorothy Sayers. Harriet Vane was tall and had dark hair, so did Dorothy Sayers. Harriet Vane wrote detective novels, so did Dorothy Sayers.

And the literary critics have said it's quite obvious what she was doing, that she was writing herself into the story. She had created this character, Lord Peter Whimsey, and the more that she developed his character, the more that she wrote about him, the more that she wrote his story, the more that she fell in love with him.

He was a great detective, he was committed to justice, he was intelligent, and he was rich, but he had flaws. He had a personal crisis, he was lonely.

And so Dorothy Sayers wrote herself into the story to rescue her main character and to fall in love with him. And friends, that is what it means for Jesus Christ to be Emmanuel.

[26 : 13] It means that God has written himself into our story to rescue us in love. In March 1791, John Wesley, the great pastor and theologian and founder of the Methodist movement, was nearing the end of a long and faithful life of ministry.

If you're not familiar with Wesley, one historian wrote about the impact of Wesley's life and said that in the course of his life, he rode over 250,000 miles on horseback.

He gave away over 30,000 pounds, which was a lot at the time, and he preached more than 40,000 sermons. He formed societies, opened chapels, trained preachers, administered aid charities, helped the sick, and oversaw many orphanages and schools.

This was a man who knew a lot about God and who did a lot for God. But in March 1791, as he was nearing his final days, as he lay on his deathbed at his home in London, his friends came and gathered around him.

And as his friends are gathered around him, as he's laying on his bed, he grasped each of their hands one by one and looked each of them in the eye and told them, farewell, farewell.

[27 : 45] But in the moments before he breathed his final breath, John Wesley called his friends to gather around him. And he told each of his friends, the best of all, the best of all is God with us.

And as his voice grew more feeble, he lifted up his arms and he spoke in a feeble voice, lifting up his arms as if giving one last pastoral benediction.

And he repeated it, the best of all is God with us. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we thank you that you have come into the world, that you have written yourself into our story, that you are Emmanuel.

Lord, I pray in the places in our hearts where we feel most alone, would you show us and reveal yourself to us in a way that we can know beyond the shadow of doubt that you're always with us.

We pray all this in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.