

God With Us

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 31 December 2023

Preacher: Rev. Jeff Simpson

[0:01] Dorothy Sayers was a 20th century British author and novelist who was known for many of her writings, but specifically her series of crime novels with her main character, Lord Peter Whimsey.

And midway through this series of crime detective novels, Sayers introduces a new character whose name is Harriet Vane, who helps Detective Peter Whimsey solve crimes and mysteries. And as the series goes on and as these two characters solve crimes together, eventually these two characters fall in love. And a lot of literary critics who have looked at this series have noticed a lot of similarities between Dorothy Sayers and her character, Harriet Vane.

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

Harriet Vane wrote detective novels, so of course did Dorothy Sayers. And what some of the literary critics have said is it's rather obvious what Dorothy Sayers was doing, that she was writing herself into the story.

[1:17] She had created this character in Detective Peter Whimsey, and 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. He was rich. But he had flaws, and he was lonely. And so she wrote herself into his story in order to rescue him, in order to fall in love with him.

And friends, in a way, this is what Christmas is all about. In the birth of Jesus Christ, we believe that God himself has written him, he has written himself into our story.

In the birth of Christ. This is what the word Emmanuel means. This Old Testament word from the prophet Isaiah that Daniel read earlier. This word Emmanuel means God with us.

And our gospel reading in Matthew chapter 1 picks it up and says the birth of Christ fulfills this prophecy in Isaiah chapter 7 that there will be a child born called God with us.

[2:21] And if you understand these three words, God with us, you'll understand what Christmas is all about. And you'll understand not just the heart of Christmas, but the heart of the Christian faith.

And so this morning, we're going to take a look at each of these three words, and we're going to unpack what it shows us about how God wrote himself into our story at Christmas. So we're going to take a look at each of these three words, God with us.

So first of all, Jesus is God. He's God. Matthew 1 verse 18 says, Mary was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.

And an angel then appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him to not be afraid or to be ashamed of Mary's pregnancy. Nothing scandalous or immoral has happened, but rather this has all happened through divine intervention.

Through the Holy Spirit, she would give birth to someone who would be given the name God. And I think a lot of people in our culture in our day find this pretty irrational.

[3:30] They find this implausible. Most people probably say Jesus was a good spiritual leader. He was a good moral teacher. But he certainly wasn't conceived supernaturally. He certainly wasn't God in the flesh.

That's just sort of an outdated, antiquated way of reading the Bible. But the problem, the main problem with believing this is that if that's true, then Jesus couldn't have been just a good spiritual leader or a good moral teacher based on his own view of himself.

The gospel accounts clearly show that Jesus did in fact believe that he himself was God. Multiple times throughout the gospels, we read accounts of people who approach Jesus and worship him, sometimes even kneeling down before him.

And what you have to understand is this was a completely absurd thing for a person, especially a Jewish person to do in the first century. Because in that culture, it was a totally blasphemous and immoral thing to worship another human being.

Only God could be worshiped. And in no instance in the gospel accounts when someone comes and kneels before Jesus and worships him, in no case does Jesus say, hey, you've got the wrong guy.

[4 : 52] I'm just a prophet. I'm just a messenger. Don't worship me. Worship God. In no case does he ever reject somebody who does that. No, in fact, it's the opposite. He accepts it and he welcomes their worship.

And so if he actually wasn't God, this wouldn't make him a great moral teacher or a spiritual leader. This would actually make him a complete fraud or a narcissist or both, perhaps.

If you have captured this better than C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*, and Lewis says this about this very point. He says, I am trying here to prevent anyone from saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Jesus.

That I'm ready to accept Jesus 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 that 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 or something worse.

[6 : 09] 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 his being a great human teacher.

He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. These are powerful words from Lewis that when it comes to Jesus, there's only really three rational responses that either he was a liar, he was a complete fraud.

Everything he said about himself was false and he knew it. Or he was a lunatic. He actually believed that he was God, but he wasn't.

Or the third option, that he's Lord, that he actually is who he claimed to be. If the Christmas story is true, then that means that Jesus is God.

And we can't just think of him as a good teacher or a spiritual leader, but as someone who actually has the right to make demands and claims on our lives, someone who deserves our worship, someone who deserves our surrender, as Tommy preached last week, somebody who deserves our obedience in every aspect of our lives.

[7 : 27] And so we have to make a choice. We have to decide for ourselves. Was Jesus a fraud? Was he a liar? Was he a lunatic? Or was he Lord?

Emmanuel means that Jesus is God. Secondly, it means that Jesus is God with us.

He's God with us. When we think about the story of Dorothy Sayers writing herself into Peter Wimsey's story as her character Harriet Vane, you know, we sort of think about that and we think, oh, you know, that's just a nice, sweet love story, right?

It's a sweet story. And I think if we're honest, sometimes I think that that's how we imagine the birth of Jesus because it's about, it's a story about a baby. It's a sweet story about a baby in the manger. And we have sweet, sentimental feelings about that. But if we actually look at what the birth of Christ is about, we see that it's not just a sweet story. In fact, what we see if we read the Old Testament is we see that it was always a radical thing when anybody got to be in the presence of God.

[8 : 40] God appears to Moses in a burning bush. He appeared to Israel on Mount Sinai with a cloud of fire, an earthquake, and a sound of trumpets.

And at Mount Sinai, no one could even go near the mountain except Moses. God told the people, even if you touch the mountain, you'll die. Encountering the presence of God is not a sweet moment.

It's actually like encountering nuclear radiation. To deal with nuclear radiation, you need lots of preparation. There's lots of stuff you have to learn, lots of protocols you have to go through. You need lots of credentials and degrees and training and probably a really, really expensive suit to deal with radioactive nuclear material. And if you don't do any of those things, it's going to kill you.

And that's what the tabernacle and the temple and the sacrificial system were for Israel. They were there to prepare an unholy people to encounter, to be with a holy radioactive God.

[9 : 48] You know, there's that line in Fellowship of the Ring when Boromir says, you know, one does not simply just walk into Mordor, right?

You can't just, no one can just walk into Mordor, right? One does not simply walk into the presence of an awesome, holy God. You won't survive. His glory will melt your face off.

And yet the news of Christmas is that this God who is so glorious and so holy came into the world as a baby. There is nothing in the world like a baby.

I have held all of my nieces and nephews when they were newborns. And, you know, one thing I've learned about holding babies is there's not much that they can do.

All that they can really do, all that they really know how to do is be with you, is be available to you, is be open to you.

[10 : 54] And that's what we should see when we see the birth of Christ, that God himself has come to be totally and completely with us, to be available to us.

Don't you see that because of the birth of Christ, all of God's radioactive presence and all of its awesome power and glory and love can actually come into our lives?

You know, every other religion in the world says, here's what you have to do. Here are the steps you have to take in order to be with God. But Christianity is the only religion that says, here is what God did to be with you.

Look at what he did. Look at what God did in the birth of Christ to make himself completely available to you, to make himself utterly open to you.

In the birth of Christ, God went to infinite lengths to be with you. And so I think the question for us is, what are we doing to be with him?

[11 : 58] I think that all of us, including myself, have excuses for not spending more time in the presence of God. And I think I'm particularly aware of that at the end of the year, as I think back on the year and I think about ways in which I have succeeded and failed at spending time in the presence of God.

Whether it's worship or prayer or studying his word. But if Abraham were here, if Moses were here, if the people of Israel were here, do you know what they would say to us?

They would say, do you know what you have access to? Do you know what's available to you? The God who revealed himself in radioactive glory on Mount Sinai.

The God who created the world and the glories of our galaxy and universe is here. And he came to be with you. And he came to give you access to him by faith.

So Jesus is God. He's God with us. And finally, he's God with us.

[13 : 11] He's God with us. In verse 21, the angel appears to Joseph in a dream and says, She, Mary, 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, your Bible probably has a footnote right next to the name Jesus that says that Jesus is the Greek name for Joshua, which means the Lord saves.

Why was Jesus Christ born into this world? Matthew chapter 1 could not be more clear that he was born into this world to save us from our sins.

And I think a lot of people in our culture today think it's narrow-minded or morally regressive to believe in the doctrine of sin. But I would actually say it's the doctrine that our culture needs the most right now.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn was a Russian author who was sentenced to be imprisoned and to work in the Gulag prison system under the Soviet Union for speaking out against the Russian government.

[14 : 23] And from prison, he wrote about how the culture that he lived in believed that there was a dividing line between good and evil.

And that this dividing line between good and evil existed between groups of people, between this group and that group. And he critiques that and he says, if that were true, we would have been able to solve humanity's problems a long, long time ago.

If humanity was just divided between good people and bad people, all we would have to do is find the good people, put them over here, find the bad people and lock them up over here, and all of humanity's problems would be solved.

And Solzhenitsyn says the reasons why we haven't been able to solve humanity's most basic problems while they still occur today is because the dividing line between good and evil doesn't exist between groups of people.

But he says it cuts through the heart of every person. It cuts through the heart of every person. If the dividing line between good and evil runs through groups of people, then if that's our view of the world, then the oppression and violence and injustice in the world will never end.

[15 : 40] Because we'll always have an enemy. It will always be us versus them. But if the dividing line between good and evil runs through every person, through your heart and through my heart, then we have no basis to look at somebody who is different from us, who believes different from us, who votes differently from us.

We have no basis to look at them and say, I'm better than you. Because the evil in the world isn't just out there. It's in here. The same evil that we see out there in the world is in us.

And that is what the Bible means when it talks about sin. And I think we need the doctrine of sin more than ever. And this is why Jesus was born. Because we all need to be rescued from this problem.

It doesn't matter what country you're from, your race, your ethnicity, rich, poor, Democrat, Republican, independent. The Bible teaches that we all fall short of God's holy standard for our lives.

We've all committed treason against the high king of the universe. We all owe God a debt that we cannot repay. And the Bible calls this sin. But the good news of Christmas is not only that Jesus is God, but that he is God with us.

[16 : 55] On the cross, Jesus Christ took on the evil that is inside each and every one of us. And he placed it on himself. He took the wrath of God in our place.

So that we can be saved. So we can be forgiven. So we can be reconciled to God. And this is good news not just for individuals, but it is good news for the whole world.

If we actually admit that the Christmas story is true. If we actually admit that Jesus came into the world to save us from our sin. To save us from the evil that is inside our own hearts.

We can't look at other people who are different from us and hate them. Jesus said, love your enemies. And this wasn't just a sweet, cute saying to put on a coffee mug.

It was a declaration that love is the only rational response to the grace that we've been shown in Christ. Do you see that the dividing line of good and evil runs through your own heart?

[17 : 58] Have you trusted in Emmanuel to rescue you from this condition? The very reason why he came. Verse 21 tells us that Jesus was born to save us from our sins.

To take down the dividing line of good and evil within your own heart. So that you in your life, in your work and vacation may cross all different kinds of dividing lines.

Of race and class and politics and neighborhood and country. And to cross them with love. And to do any different is to completely miss what Christmas is all about.

Because that is what God did for us. In the birth of Christ. So Jesus is Emmanuel.

He's God. And therefore he demands our worship and our obedience. He demands our entire lives. And therefore we can't just treat him as a good teacher.

[19 : 03] We can't just treat him as a spiritual leader. He's God with us. He's done everything necessary to be with you.

He's made himself completely open and accessible to you. What are you doing to be with him? What do you need to change?

What do you need to stop doing? What do you need to start doing? To be with him. What do you need to do? What do you need to do? And finally, he's God with us.

With us. Sinners in need of a savior. That's the heart of Christmas. It's the heart of Christian faith that God himself, through the birth of Christ, has written himself into our story.

All because of love. That's not just a sweet story about a baby in a manger. But it's invitation to radically good news that can not only change our lives, but change the world.

[20 : 10] Let's pray. Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us.

Thank you that you were born into this world to save us from our sin. Help us to see you and to follow you as the God that you came to be.

Lord, all of us this Christmas need your presence. We need you to be with us. We need you to rescue us. We need you to change us. We need you to transform us.

Lord, would you do that in this season? Would you reveal to us how powerful it is that you are Emmanuel? Would you show us the glory of that this Christmas, we pray.
Amen.