

The God Who is With Us

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[0 : 00] Well, a couple songs ago during the service we sang a well-known Christmas carol, and it's really one of the few songs we sing in a minor key, and it's played in a minor key for a reason.

It carries with it an intense sense of longing. O come, O come, Emmanuel. And this song really captures the longing of Advent, the longing of this season of our calendar in which God's people are waiting, they're agonizing for him to send his Messiah.

We're, in a sense, reenacting that long period of longing as we were looking forward to God sending his chosen, anointed king into the world.

Now, when we sing that we are longing for Emmanuel, what is it that we're expressing longing for? Now, a few minutes ago, in singing that, we were praying for Emmanuel to come, and so we're asking, who or what is this Emmanuel?

And that word Emmanuel is a name, but it's a name that carries with it a special meaning. And we can learn this from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 1, and there we read about an angel who appears to a first-century Jewish man named Joseph.

[1 : 14] And Joseph's fiancée, Mary, has become pregnant, and here's what an angel says to Joseph as he appears to him in a dream. Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord has spoken by the prophet.

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us. So that's literally what the name Emmanuel means.

It's Hebrew for God with us, or God is with us. So the story of the Advent season, the story of Christmas, it's the story of Emmanuel.

It's the story of how God the Son, who is fully God, he came to the earth as a baby. He became fully man as well.

[2 : 25] And he took on the name Jesus to save his people from their sins, from their evil thoughts, from their evil words, from their evil actions of rebellion against God's will.

Emmanuel, it's the story of the God who is with us. And that's a story that was foreshadowed by the Old Testament book of Exodus. It's a book we've been studying since January.

And what we've seen is that the book of Exodus has shown us three great truths about God. So I'm just curious, who knows what the three great truths about God are that we've been learning from the book? God is great.

God is good. God is with us. God is great. God is good. God is with us. And I've just been repeating that incessantly until you've been sick of it, haven't I? From January to April, over the course of this year.

So for the first four months of the year, we encounter this God, the Lord, Yahweh. A God who is completely powerful. A God who is completely independent.

[3 : 30] So human beings, people like you and me, we are fearful. We're intimidated by political powers. We sense our own inadequacy, our own powerlessness. But this God, he reigns utterly supreme over all human governments.

And so the great Pharaoh, that undisputed ruler of this ancient superpower of Egypt, a superpower that lasted for millennia, Pharaoh may have tried to enslave and control God's chosen people, the people of Israel.

But Pharaoh's authority was no match for the mighty hand of the Lord. The Lord inflicted 10 awful plagues on the land of Egypt until Pharaoh was forced to relent, until he was forced to let God's people go.

And even when Pharaoh changed his mind, even when Pharaoh sent his best military units, his crack troops, the pride of the ancient world, and he sent them after the Lord's people, this God parted the Red Sea to bring his people safely through.

And then as Pharaoh and his army followed, he brought the waters back on them, drowned Pharaoh's chariots and horsemen as they tried to give chase. And so we learn the words of the song of Moses in Exodus chapter 15.

[4 : 51] I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously. The horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation.

This is my God, and I will praise him. My Father's God, and I will exalt him. The Lord is a man of war. The Lord is his name.

So through all of these wonders, we learn together that God is great. And then from the month of May through the month of October, we saw the character of the Lord unfolding even more.

This great God, he's overpowered Pharaoh and his army, but we began to see that this God is not only powerful, he's also tender. He's not only mighty, he's also righteous.

He's not only great, he's also good. And so we saw the Lord patiently provide for his people in the desert, giving them fresh water and bread to gather each day.

[5 : 59] We saw him setting up a wise judicial system for them. We saw him protecting them from desert raiders. We saw that the Lord appeared to them at Mount Sinai, giving them his ten commandments, giving them many other laws to illustrate how to carry out these commandments, teaching them how to think, how to speak, how to act in love to him, in love to one another.

And we heard the promise of a good covenant relationship with him in Exodus chapter 19. You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

Now, therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

So through all of these provisions, through all of these laws, we learn together that God is good.

And then, from October up until this Sunday, we've seen that this God who is great, this God who is good, he is also a God who wants to be with us.

This is a God who gave instructions for a royal residence to be built for him, a tabernacle, so that his presence could be seen, so that he could be worshipped by his people, so that his people could be protected by his greatness, so they could be satisfied and enjoy his goodness.

[7 : 43] So we heard him instruct Moses in Exodus chapter 25, let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell in their midst. The thing is, though, we've also learned that it's a dangerous thing for a holy God, a good God, a perfect and righteous God, who hates all evil, who hates all sin, all defilement.

It's a dangerous thing for him to dwell among a sinful people. His people began to pervert the worship of him right away, making this golden calf to worship, breaking their covenant relationship with him right from the get-go.

This adulterous, unfaithful behavior. But the Lord's mediator, Moses, he was able to plead for mercy. The Lord restored his covenant relationship with his people because Moses interceded for them.

So leading up to this point, we have seen, we have heard, we have felt all of this longing for Emmanuel, all this longing for this God who is great and good to be with us.

And now in Exodus chapter 40, all of those hopes, all of that longing of Israel, they're going to come true. The God who is great, the God who is good, is now the God who is with us.

[9 : 13] So let's look at this final chapter of Exodus. Now once again, if you're using one of the blue Bibles our ushers handed out, that's on page 80, Exodus chapter 40. Now last week in Exodus chapter 39, we read that all the preparations for God with us, all of these preparations have been completed.

So the tabernacle, the house of God, we've got the priests, the servants of God, all of the structures, all those finishings, all those garments that we went into so much detail about, they've all been prepared.

Everything is ready for God to be with his people. All of the Lord's instructions have been fully obeyed and now the tabernacle needs to be set up. Now it's time for the priest to be set apart as

holy to the Lord, as devoted to him and only to him.

But the Lord's got in mind a certain day that this should all be done. A certain day when the Lord is going to dwell with his people. And so he tells Moses in Exodus chapter 40, verse 2.

On the first day of the first month, you shall erect the tabernacle of the tent of meeting. So the first day of the first month of the Jewish calendar.

[10:26] And this was just before their first annual Passover celebration. So it's been almost one year since they left Egypt. And this is their New Year's Day. As we learned earlier this year, the Passover festival had marked the time when the Lord made a new beginning for his people by rescuing them from slavery in Egypt.

And now, on this, on their New Year's Day, the tabernacle is going to be completed. Now think about New Year's Day in our culture. We often create New Year's resolutions.

Now why do we do that? Well, I think it's because we sense that, you know, it is sort of artificial. It is sort of arbitrary. But we sense that January 1st, this is the beginning of a new year.

We're soon going to come to the beginning of 2018. And so, this is a new year and a place where we can begin a new chapter or a new story in our lives. We can begin again.

And so it is with the tabernacle. That's how it is when God comes to be with his people. It's the beginning of a new story. It's the beginning of a story that extends beyond the pages of Exodus all the way through the Old Testament a story that leads to Jesus Christ.

[11:43] A story that leads to a better and truer mediator than Moses. A better and truer high priest than Aaron. A better and truer dwelling place than the tabernacle.

So in verses 9 through 15, the Lord instructs Moses to consecrate, to set apart for his service, to consecrate the tabernacle and its priests.

So in verse 9, then you shall take the anointing oil and anoint the tabernacle and all that is in it and consecrate it and all its furniture so that it may become holy.

And then verses 12 through 15, you shall bring Aaron and his sons to the entrance of the tent of meeting and shall wash them with water and put on Aaron the holy garments.

And you shall anoint him and consecrate him that he may serve me as priest. You shall bring his sons also and put coats on them and anoint them as you anointed their father that they may serve me as priests.

[12:44] And their anointing shall admit them to a perpetual priesthood throughout their generations. So the formula for the sacred anointing oil, this was part of the tabernacle instructions in Exodus chapter 30.

This oil, it was a scented oil, very expensive and it was prepared specifically to set apart the tabernacle, to set apart the priests, to mark them out as holy, as set apart for the Lord.

So, in our culture, you know, we've seen a revival in viewing oils as essential to health. We've got essential oils that are being, you know, that are marketed and sold. And in that culture, oil was also associated with health and vitality.

It was used for health and beauty on the head and on the skin. And oil was also used to make someone clean. In a world, a world a little bit different from ours, a world in which head lice was a common problem.

Right? Rubbing oil into your hair and soaking your hair in oil, that was a way of killing off the adult lice. So they didn't have those delousing shampoos, unfortunately.

[13:54] Louse, I didn't even realize, I never made this connection until one commentator used the word lousy and I was like, oh, that's where the word lousy comes from. It's from lousy. So next time you call someone lousy, now you know what you're really calling them, right?

They're going to need to start picking through their hair. But the lousy priests were not worthy of the Lord. The oil was a way of removing that contamination. I mean, we get this, right?

And the ancient world was no different than today. Lice, it's gross. It's contaminated, it's dirty. If someone has lice, you know, quarantine them. You don't want that contamination to get everywhere.

So the oil was a way of removing that contamination, that uncleanness from your body. It was a way of restoring the priests to good health and to new life. When you put oil on your face, your face just shines, it glows.

We also see in these verses the priests, not only were they anointed with oil, but they were to be washed with water. Washed with water from the bronze wash basin in the tabernacle courtyard.

[15:00] And in this way, the priests there to be cleaned up, washed clean, made holy to the Lord. Then in verses 16 through 33, Moses obeys all of the Lord's instructions and he follows them all word for word.

Moses sets up the tabernacle, Moses sets apart the priests as holy to the Lord. Verse 29, Moses even roasts the burnt offering and the grain offering on the bronze altar. So Moses is serving the Lord here.

He's acting as the builder, he's acting as the priest until Aaron and his sons are set apart for the priesthood themselves. And so this is the story that begins, the story that's beginning as the book of Exodus comes to an end.

It's a story that begins with a holy people, it's a story that begins with an obedient servant of the Lord. This is the story of Emmanuel, the story of God with us.

Emmanuel is the beginning of a new story of holy obedience. Emmanuel is the beginning of a new story of holy obedience. And I think it's quite appropriate that Christmas Day comes only a week before the new year because now that God is with us, now that we have Emmanuel, now that we have a new story, this new story can begin.

[16:21] When Jesus Christ came, Jesus brought an end to all of these sacrifices, to all of these offerings. Jesus came to obey his Father, to do the will of God, and he did that by offering himself as the once-for-all final, ultimate sacrifice, the one that actually does make you and me holy, not only clean on the outside, but clean on the inside, that cleanses you and me and everyone else who believes in Jesus.

Washing us free from defilement and shame. Anointing us with the favor, the affirmation, the blessing of God.

So in the New Testament of the Bible, in Hebrews chapter 10, it's written, consequently, when Christ came into the world, so this is the Christmas story, when Christ came into the world, he said, sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me.

In burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.

When he said above, you have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings, these are offered according to the law. Then he added, behold, I have come to do your will.

[17:52] He does away with the first in order to establish the second. So what the author of Hebrews means is he does away with all of those sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings in order to establish God's will.

And by that will, we have been sanctified, that means marked out as holy, set apart as holy, made holy. By that will, we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

So Jesus was not only born as a human being, as a baby, the story doesn't stop there. Jesus grew up, Jesus became a man who lived this perfect life of obedience to God.

He did his father's will, word for word. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

And so because Emmanuel has been obedient, he has made us holy. He has sanctified you and me, making us holy and clean, freed from your sin, cleansed from your shame.

[19:08] So now you are part of a new story, a new exodus from the slavery and shame of sin.

Emmanuel is the beginning of a new story of holy obedience for you and for me. And now that this new story has begun in Exodus chapter 40, we read the Lord's response to the holy obedience of his mediator, Moses, and his people.

Verses 34 and 35. Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.

So this glory cloud, this cloud that had led the people out from Egypt all the way back in Exodus chapter 12, this pillar of cloud and fire that stood between them and the Egyptian army and kept them safe, this cloud that had led them through the desert, that had swallowed the peak of Mount Sinai with fire, with lightning, thick smoke, this glory cloud, it marks the presence of the Lord among his people.

This cloud that had, up till now, stayed in front of the camp or behind the camp or settled on Mount Sinai but always separated from the camp of the people of God.

[20 : 39] It's now descended among them, right in the middle of them, right in the middle of their camp, on the tabernacle, covering the tent, filling it, filling it to the point that Moses can't even go in to the tent in the middle of the tabernacle courtyards.

And the commentator Douglas Stewart makes this observation. By the present act of occupying his house through his glory and temporarily keeping all others out, God showed Moses and all Israel that the house was now his and his alone and indeed his truly and entirely the very thing they had built it to become.

The Lord is claiming the tabernacle as his own house. His own home, his own dwelling place among his people. The Lord is making his home with his people.

And the presence of the Lord with his people means that he is now leading them personally. This is not leading at a distance. He is now leading them in person.

The journey has resumed. This journey to the land of Canaan. To a land that the Lord had promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the ancestors of the people of Israel. They're bound for the promised land.

[22 : 01] And in verses 36 and 37 we read, throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out.

But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out till the day that it was taken up. So the Lord is leading his people. His plan for them is moving ahead.

The God who is great, the God who brought that powerful empire of Egypt to its knees, he will do the same for the enemies of his people who are waiting for them in the promised land.

The God who is great is the God who is with us. The journey is going to proceed forward exactly as the Lord planned it from the beginning of time in his sovereign and secret will.

Another commentator assures us, the people of God should take great comfort in this. The God of Exodus is still guiding.

[23 : 05] God is present with his people wherever they go for he still leads and guides them, not to Canaan but to a better country, a heavenly one.

God is present and so this God who is great, he is still leading and guiding us today and he is not only great but he's also a God who is good. So when God makes a promise, he is faithful to keep it. The Lord not only makes his home with his people, he not only leads his people but he remains with his people. He will not leave them, he will not forsake them, the book of Exodus it closes with these words from verse 38.

For the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day and fire was on it by night in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys.

So the Lord remains with them day and night which is a way of saying 24 hours a day throughout all of their journeys. this is the new story of Emmanuel.

[24 : 21] This is the story of God with us. Emmanuel is the beginning of a new story of holy obedience and a new journey to our home. It's the beginning of a new story of holy obedience and a new journey to our home.

Emmanuel is a story of a new journey we take. a journey in which the God who is great the God who is good is also the God who is with us. And the Lord has made his home with us.

He leads us. He remains with us to the end as we continue our journey to his promised land to the new heavens and the new earth that he is creating where he will come to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found.

And that commentator on the book of Exodus writes, the end of Exodus is not just the end of the story but the beginning of many others.

This is true not only for the Israelites whose ups and downs are cataloged for us in scripture but for us as well. We who have been redeemed by Christ are also poised daily for the journeys we take toward our final goal.

[25 : 38] Israel's Exodus as ours is for a purpose to bring us onward and upward. Now that is the good news of Emmanuel, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

You and I, we are traveling as strangers, as aliens in a barren land in a world where we are not at home, where we don't belong. But God sent his own son into the world to walk that same pilgrim road.

God has sent his Holy Spirit to remain with us in our journey. And the Lord our God will never stop working to make us complete, to prepare us for the end of our journey, to make us holy and obedient to God so that we will find utter joy, utter satisfaction in him on the day when Jesus Christ returns.

So as the Apostle Paul writes in Philippians chapter one, I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Christ. And so we know that our hope will never fail. We are going to reach our destination together.

[27 : 04] You know that, right? We are bound for the promised land. Emmanuel, it's the beginning of a new story of holy obedience and a new journey to our home because our God is great, our God is good, our God is with us.