

TITLE: "We're All in This Together"

TEXT: Matthew 1:18-25 (NT p. 1)

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"

which means, "God is with us."

²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took Mary as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Introduction – Incarnation

Let me begin with a story. This is a true story:

In 1873 a Belgian Catholic priest named Joseph Damien de Veuster was sent to minister to lepers on the Hawaiian Island of Molokai. When he arrived he met each leper in the colony in hopes of building a friendship and a ministry. But wherever he turned, people shunned him. It seemed that every door to ministry was closed. He poured his life into his work, erecting a chapel and beginning worship services and pouring out his heart to the lepers. But it was to no avail! No one responded to his ministry. After 12 years of rejection and failure Father Damien decided to leave.

Dejected, he made his way to the docks to board a ship to take him back home to Belgium. As he stood on the dock, he wrung his hands nervously as he recounted his futile ministry among the lepers. As he did, he looked down at his hands ...and he noticed some mysterious white spots and felt some numbness. He immediately knew what was happening to his body. He had leprosy and was now a leper!

At that moment that he knew what he had to do. He returned to his work. The news about his disease spread quickly through the island. Within a matter of hours everyone in the colony knew. Hundreds of them gathered outside his hut. They understood his pain, fear and uncertainty about the future.

But the biggest surprise was the following Sunday as Father Damien arrived at the chapel to conduct the morning service. He found hundreds of worshipers already there. By the time the service began, there was standing room only—the place was packed with people and many more were gathered outside the chapel!

Why the change? ...Father Damien had become one of them. He could understand their hurt and fear and they could understand his hurt and fear.

On the first Christmas, God, who is so holy, so awesome and so powerful, gave up His glory in heaven and came down to us. And that is why Jesus is called Emmanuel, which means “God is with us.” ...Another way to put ‘God with us’ is to say, “We are all in this together.” We are all in this together with God as individuals, we are all in this together with God in our families, we are all in this together with God in our church family and we are all in this together with God and all the people in the world.

1. We are together with God in our families

In most families, there are people who are easy to love, people who are almost impossible to love and people all across the continuum between those two extremes. If we are all in this together with God, then we are to love those who are almost impossible to love.

We have someone in our extended family who has been a problem since he was a child. He has been on drugs, he has been in jail and in prison and he has used and hurt his family and extended family more times than I care to recount. If there ever was a model failure as a family member, he is it.

But because God never gives up on people, and because we are all in this together with God, we are not to give up on anyone in our family. Carol and I have prayed for this guy for years and we sent him things he needed when he was in prison. Now he has made it through rehab and lives in a halfway house, he has earned his GED, he has his driver's license and he has a new job.

This Christmas season, pray for people in your family. Forgive those who need your forgiveness whether they ask for it or not. Keep the lines of communication open especially with those who don't deserve it. Why? ...Because we are in this together with God and our families and you may be the one and only ray of hope in the darkness of that person's life.

2. We are all in this together with our church family

I begin every day by listing many of the things I am grateful for. I am grateful for the forgiveness I have through my faith in Jesus Christ. I am thankful for my relationship with God. I rejoice in that the Holy Spirit which guides and directs me and gives me the power I need to do what God wants me to do. Then I have a whole BUNCH of things I am thankful for, but right at the top is our church family.

I can't imagine Christmas apart from you all. I enjoy worshiping together, singing Christmas carols, decorating the church and sharing a meal together which we will do after the service today, and I enjoy lighting our candles together at the Christmas Eve service. It's very comforting for me to know that whatever we have to face this coming year, we're all in this together with God and each other.

That is why I am especially appreciative of our elders and deacons this morning. In a few moments, we will be ordaining and installing elders and deacons who will be leading our church in 2012. And I want to thank those who volunteered to serve again, those who volunteered to serve a new term and those who are currently serving. ...

And I want to thank each of you here this morning. Thank you for all you do to make our congregation the wonderful church family that it is.

3. We are all in this together with people in need all around the world

A week ago Saturday, Carol and I were returning from Connecticut along Route 23 east of Oneonta and there was a sign that read "Route 23 ends in 7 miles." Then there were similar signs each mile. We drove on hoping that there would be a sign telling us where to detour, but there wasn't one. But when we came to the town of Prattsville, where Route 23 is totally washed away, we were amazed at the devastation due to flooding.

There were no undamaged homes or business. Many buildings had actually been washed right away. Some were being demolished. Others were obviously uninhabitable. In the whole town, there was only one building with a light inside. That light revealed just the shell of a house that had been completely gutted inside. It was like one of those ghost towns you see out west with tumbleweeds blowing down the main street, but there the damage was done by water, not by wind and sand.

But at the last presbytery meeting, I heard about hope in the midst of the carnage from flooding in Conklin, Binghamton, Endicott, Johnson City, Margaretville and Owego. In each of those towns, Presbyterian congregations are helping people recover from the flooding. Many people in our church family have made donations for local flood relief and others have gone to sites and helped with the clean up and that is appreciated.

That is what we do. We help those in need because “God so loved the WORLD that he gave his only Son so that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.” The world in which we live is full of problems, and our church family cannot solve them all, but we can help some of those in need because we are all in this together with God and all the people in the world.

Conclusion – Our hope in the darkness is love

Many people feel that 2011 has been a tough year. The economy has been stagnant, the problems in the Middle East persist, there have been many natural disasters and extreme weather events, there is a lot of pressure in the workplace and many families are having problems. Someone recently said to me, “I can’t wait for this year to be over.”

But this year is not over. Christmas is still coming. Maybe there is a reason that Christmas comes at the end of the year rather than at the beginning.

That first Christmas came at in the midst of tough times too. There were tensions between the oppressive Roman Government and the Jewish people, the might of Rome was diminishing and the local economy was shaky. Maybe it’s true that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

God became one of us so that he could understand what it is like to be a human being in the midst of a world filled with problems and joys, poverty and plenty, love and hate, war and peace. God wanted to be a part of the mosaic that is human life here on earth.

So, at the very end of the year, no matter how dark things may seem for us personally and for the world at large, there IS a light in the darkness, and that light gives us hope, and that light came as a baby born in a stable in Bethlehem.

And that is the why Jesus Christ is called Emmanuel, which means "God is with us." 'God is with us' means that we are all in this together. And because God is together with each of us:

We are all in this together with God and our families,

We are all in this together with God and church family and

We are all in this together with God and people in need throughout the world.

Amen.