

Christmas I Sermon text
December 27, 2020
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Luke 2: (The Message)

²²⁻²⁴ Then when the days stipulated by Moses for purification were complete, they took [Jesus] up to Jerusalem to offer him to God as commanded in God's Law: "Every male who opens the womb shall be a holy offering to God," and also to sacrifice the "pair of doves or two young pigeons" prescribed in God's Law.

²⁵⁻³² In Jerusalem at the time, there was a man, Simeon by name, a good man, a man who lived in the prayerful expectancy of help for Israel. And the Holy Spirit was on him. The Holy Spirit had shown him that he would see the Messiah of God before he died. Led by the Spirit, he entered the Temple. As the parents of the child Jesus brought him in to carry out the rituals of the Law, Simeon took him into his arms and blessed God:

God, you can now release your servant;
release me in peace as you promised.
With my own eyes I've seen your salvation;
it's now out in the open for everyone to see:
A God-revealing light to the non-Jewish nations,
and of glory for your people Israel.

³³⁻³⁵ Jesus' father and mother were speechless with surprise at these words. Simeon went on to bless them, and said to Mary his mother,

This child marks both the failure and
the recovery of many in Israel,
A figure misunderstood and contradicted—
the pain of a sword- thrust through you—
But the rejection will force honesty,
as God reveals who they really are.

³⁶⁻³⁸ Anna the prophetess was also there, a daughter of Phanuel from the tribe of Asher. She was by now a very old woman. She had been married seven years and a widow for eighty-four. She never left the Temple area, worshiping night and day with her fastings and prayers. At the very time Simeon was praying, she showed up, broke into an anthem of praise to God, and talked about the child to all who were waiting expectantly for the freeing of Jerusalem.

³⁹⁻⁴⁰ When they finished everything required by God in the Law, they returned to Galilee and their own town, Nazareth. There the child grew strong in body and wise in spirit. And the grace of God was on him.

Our son, Nick, is now 27 years old. He's 6'5", so he is someone that I literally I look up to. I remember when he was barely 2 years old, just a little guy, and he would often wake up in the morning earlier than

Satya and I would want to get up. So, when we heard him stirring, one of us would go and bring him from his bed and put him into our bed with us and he would snuggle down between the two of us and sometimes fall asleep again. But as he was laying there on his back, he would stretch out one arm and grab onto his mom's bare elbow and he would reach out his other arm and grab onto my nose. And then he could relax. He was holding onto us with his hands, flesh on flesh. He knew we were there with him and he was safe.

Sometimes you need a flesh-on-flesh, tangible connection to know that everything is okay.

St. John writes, ¹⁴ "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Sometimes, at difficult moments in our lives, some of us wonder where God is and whether God cares. Especially when the world gets crazy and dangerous like it is now, especially when we are going through a hard time. Sometimes God can feel so distant and we wonder if God really cares and will come to help us. And then the news comes, as it does every Christmas, that God has become flesh and lives among us. Not only 2000 years ago when Jesus was born in Bethlehem. But right now, right here among us, in this day, God is once again born in our world, born as someone we can hold onto, so that we are filled with life and peace.

In our Gospel lesson, it's the elderly Simeon who can't resist holding the child. Nick liked to hold on to us, his parents. Simeon just had to take the baby Jesus in his arms. For years and years, Simeon had waited for God to come and bring life and freedom to God's people. Simeon had lived through terrible things. He had seen the Roman armies conquer Israel. He had seen all kinds of political fights within Israel as King Herod and the temple authorities and the Pharisees all battled for power. During this time, Simeon had seen 90% of the people slip into hunger and poverty. But on this particular day, the Holy Spirit had brought Simeon to the temple at just the right time and he saw the baby Jesus. And he knew. He knew, "This is God's promise become flesh. This is God's life, God's salvation for us." And Simeon couldn't resist taking the child and holding him in his arms, saying, "Now my life is complete, Lord, Now you may let your servant depart in peace, for you are here. You have come to save and heal your people."

Anna was there in the temple, too, that day. Anna was an elderly, 84-year-old woman who came and served in the temple every day. There is an interesting little detail that St. Luke tells us about Anna. He says that she was a widow. In Hebrew culture, women who were widows were often expected to be silent and keep to the background. Widows didn't have any status or importance anymore. Widows were expected to stay quiet and give way to everyone else. But, when Anna saw the baby, she couldn't keep quiet. She broke into a song and started telling everyone about the child. Because the word had become flesh. God was there with them. And God doesn't want anybody to be forced to be quiet and trapped. God wants everyone to dance and sing and speak their truth. Especially the widows, especially the so-called unimportant, silent ones. So, that's what Anna did.

Martin Luther once said that God is present everywhere, "even in my cabbage soup," said Luther. God is everywhere and fills everything in the whole universe. But, said Luther, God knew that if God stayed invisible all the time, then we would naturally start to feel uncertain and wonder where God is and whether God is even with us. So, said Luther, God decided to give us some clear, physical signs that God is present. Things that we can see with our eyes and touch with our hands. God gave us Jesus, the word

become flesh. Next, said Luther, God gave us the sacraments. The water of Baptism and the bread and wine of Holy Communion. When we feel the water pour over us, when we taste the bread and wine, we also taste God's goodness. We know that, just as God is with us in the water and the bread and wine, God is present with us every day to give us life and joy and justice in the world.

Furthermore, Luther said, there is a third sacrament. The third sacrament that God gives us is each other. As Luther puts it, God becomes truly present "in the mutual consolation and conversation of the brothers and sisters." When you care for each other, in that moment you experience God in your midst. When you encourage and support each other, God is born again in that moment among you. As St. Paul puts it, "You are the body of Christ in the world." God's love and justice is born in the world through you.

For many years before I was elected bishop, I was a pastor in Vancouver, WA. Like all pastors, if any of my church members needed to go to the hospital, I would visit them there. There were about six hospitals in the area and one of the hospitals that I would drive to was across the Columbia River in Portland, named Emanuel Hospital. Emanuel Hospital was started 108 years ago in the year 1912 by Lutherans in Portland, and those Lutherans very thoughtfully named it Emanuel, God with us.

Isaiah 7: "Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and you will call his name Emanuel, God with us."

Emanuel is one of the top trauma hospitals in the area. That means that, if you are in really bad shape, if you are in a horrible car accident, if your body is bleeding, they take you to Emanuel. And I would often think to myself, "What a wonderful name, that as the physicians and medical staff care for people, as they are perform surgeries and sew people back up and bring people to health, they are a physical sign of Emanuel, God with us. They are God's love coming to life right in the middle of the city.

That is happening so vividly right now in every hospital across our country, especially in this time of the COVID pandemic. Each day doctors and nurses and technicians and hospital staff are going to the hospital. They are risking their lives,... far too often they are giving their lives, to care for others. They are sacraments. They are signs of Emanuel, God with us. Fire fighters, first responders, police officers, dedicating their lives to help others. Teachers, grocery store workers, food plant workers. Giving themselves to serve others.

And all of you, all of us, we are signs of Emanuel, God with us. Not just when we are doing remarkable acts of heroism, but when we are simply being decent to each other, when we treat each other with respect, when we work together to improve our cities, when we care for people regardless of race or religion, when we call up a friend to see how they are doing.

God has a dream for us. God wants life and blessing and joy and justice for each one of us and for creation itself. So, as Jesus was born in Bethlehem, God comes again and again to be born among us. Our lives become sacramental. Together, by the power of God working in us, we become Emanuel, God with us, bringing life to others in every way that they need it.

That is what we celebrate in this Holy Time of Christmas. That is the gift we receive and the gift we become. In Jesus' name. Amen.