

Emmanuel - Matthew 1:18-25

Last week's sermon was kind of a slog for me. I wasn't feeling very hopeful and not very joyful either. And the sermon was pretty honest about that. Sometimes that's the best a preacher can do.

When I first read the text for this week, I just groaned. Emmanuel....I'm just not feelin' it God.

But then, in rapid succession, I encountered several things at the beginning of the week that were exactly what I needed to hear. Before I wade in, here's the short version – the things I encountered weren't just intellectual aha moments. They all felt like an actual *experience* of this Emmanuel – God with us...God with me. And what I realized too is that this God with us is not just with us in some neutral way. Emmanuel is God *for* us.

The first thing I encountered was in a daily meditation I receive by email and use for my own prayer and meditation time. In the Sunday reflection, Richard Rohr talked about three different worldviews. The first is the view that everything in the universe is against us. The second is that the universe is neutral. The third is that the universe is for us.

While he uses the word universe, on a deeper level what he was really talking about is how we see God – is God against us, for us, or neutral.

Often, even for people of faith – and I have to confess sometimes including myself, God seems neutral. We might believe that God exists. We go to church and go through the motions. But then stuff happens...life happens. And we struggle to believe that God is truly active in our lives in a way that helps us. We feel the need to fix things or control things...and mostly things that are neither ours to fix or control.

This is probably the fundamental doubt with which Christians are tempted. It's the temptation that says we're on our own when things get tough.

Eventually, that can become a belief that God is against us...that our struggles are a punishment, or some sort of cruel test. Some folks start there – for them God is a vengeful God whose wrath has to be appeased. That's God against us.

Our text today from Matthew says something different – Jesus will be God with us...but not just with us, Jesus is God for us. Jesus is God for us because he frees us from the traps sin lays for us...our own sin and that of others.

The second thing I encountered was on a Facebook page I follow – the Contemplative Monk. It was a quote from Julian of Norwich, a religious hermit of the middle ages.

I've seen the first part of her quote many times before. It says, "All will be well, and all will be well and all manner of things will be well."

While there's lots to admire and be in awe of in Mother Julian's work, I've always wondered how she could look at the world around and say that. But there's a second part to the quote I'd never seen until this week, and it makes all the difference: "for there is a force of love moving through the universe that holds us fast and will never let us go."

That's when the quote, at least for me, moves from what sounds like blind...even naïve... optimism to actual trust that God for us loves us and is working for us, even when it most assuredly doesn't look like all will be well.

Maybe a pithier version is that found in the movie, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* – "everything will be alright in the end, so if it's not alright, it's not the end." In other words, when things are not alright, we can trust that God is still working, *for us*. Because God is that force of love that holds us fast and never lets us go.

Then the clincher for the week is a gem from the Wednesday email meditation. This one is from Sister Ilia Delio who is a Franciscan nun with PhDs in pharmacology and historic theology. She teaches and writes extensively on the intersection of faith and science.

Sometimes I can barely grasp what she's saying. But Wednesday's quote was pretty clear. First a definition – she uses the word theodicy. Theodicy relates to how we understand God's role in world events and the events of our lives. The core theodicy question is this: if God is all good and all powerful, why does evil exist?

So, here's Dr. Delio's quote: The theodicy question is not why God allows bad things to happen to good people but why we abandon God in the face of suffering. If God is love, then our only real hope is in God, because hope is the openness of love to infinite possibilities and new life. . . This God of love appears in Jesus of Nazareth, a God who gets radically involved in the messiness of the world to be God for us.

Emmanuel...a God who gets radically involved in the messiness of the world to be God for us. I've never read a better definition.

But as I said, this wasn't just a weeklong intellectual journey. By the time I got to Wednesday, the things I'd encountered actually had a significant impact on me.

The words, the timing...they were all what I needed when I needed them. And to me, it felt like God with me, and God for me.

They were me recognizing that God doesn't abandon me when things get hard...I'm much more likely to abandon God and try to go it alone.

They were me grasping that God is the force of love in the universe and God is always for us...even and maybe especially when we struggle.

We too often need to see that all is well before we trust the force of love in the universe – before we trust that God is in fact for us. But the reality works the other way...when things aren't well.

At least for me, I'm most likely to get to that trust when I reach the utter end of what I can do. Jesus had lots of things to say about what we can do...love our neighbors, care for the sick, visit those in prison, feed the hungry, love our enemies, don't retaliate, practice non-violence.

We're called to worship, to pray, to work for justice and peace. We're called to be workers in God's realm.

But we're not called to do everything, everywhere, all at once. And we're not called to be solo warriors. It's that approach that too often makes me grumpy and despairing and even doubting the ability of God to do much.

Human nature as it is, we seem to have to be shown that we can't go it alone. At least I do. When we have exhausted our ability to make the world be what we think it should be, we hit a wall and crumble.

But often that's the beginning of trust. On the other side of that breakdown is the God with us who never abandons us. We learn, again, that we can't rely solely on our own abilities and initiative. We learn again that we can trust that God's love and God's spirit are what give us life and empowers us. We learn to trust that God gives us the community we need to thrive. And we learn to trust that whatever happens, God's love surrounds us to bring hope and healing.

As I conclude, I come back to Julian of Norwich - there is a force of love moving through the universe that holds us fast and will never let us go."

That force of love...that Emmanuel...that God with us and God for us is that same baby whose remarkable birth the angel announced to Joseph.