

Global Good: For the Sake of the One

*A sermon preached on Isaiah 35:1-10 by Emily Hull McGee
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on December 22, 2019*

I.

'Tis the season for Christmas pageants, and children's questions of wonder, and the anticipation of it all just hanging in the air!

I read this week a beautiful story that said this: "Consider the wonder of a child who has become anxious in this anticipation. The second-grade boy has been touched by a classroom presentation. Three fifth-grade girls, costumed in angelic apparel with tinfoil-wrapped halos, entered his classroom. They became a scene of two clueless angels being exhorted by an enlightened one about the coming of a baby Jesus. The tidings of joy and expectancy troubled this little boy. After the angels departed, the boy goes up to his teacher. With a quivering voice, he asks, "We go out to recess in ten minutes. Will the baby Jesus come while we are gone? I don't want to miss him. What if he comes here while we are outside?"¹

II.

How familiar that worry!

Over these Advent weeks, we've heard God's invitation unfolding through our ancient texts — a reminder, a claim, a promise that the Messiah is coming, and we will not miss it! The claim that the Messiah is coming for the sake of the world. Dazzling images have guided that claim: weapons of war transformed into tools for harvest, shoots emerging from stumps, a

¹ Story shared through the Highland Baptist Church (Louisville, KY) Advent Devotional Email by Bruce Otto on December 20, 2019: <https://mailchi.mp/hbclouisville/advent-devotional-guide-day-1-fhttul8ux9-2458201?e=ed69ee90c5>

peaceable creation where hunter and hunted play together. For in the unfolding of this promise, Isaiah has reached for the all-encompassing, the big, the global picture of what good a coming Messiah would offer to all the world.

Now if you were listening carefully last week in worship — which I know you all were doing! — you didn't just hear the unimaginably beautiful music or the nine lessons unfolding the mystery of God's work in the world. You also heard today's Isaiah reading from chapter 35, proclaiming on Joy Sunday the exuberant imagery of all creation bursting with new life. Liturgical rules aside, I wanted us to dwell again with this poem and its imagery. Because along with the cosmic expressions of joy it evokes, there's also an intimate promise of love I hear in this text.

For in all the abundant mystery of the incarnation, of the birth of Jesus into the world — mystery that looks like God made flesh, a virgin who conceives, a father who names, angels who announce, shepherds who hear it first, sages who follow a star — one that persists through the years is the incarnational mystery of proximity, specificity, and scale. For the coming of Christ is good for the world! All creation! All people! All who suffer or sigh, all who grieve or dance. As Walter Brueggemann says about this passage: "The poet envisions all of creation, all the creatures, in religious pilgrimage — the blind, deaf, dumb, and lame — but also crocuses, grass, and jackals. All are alike. All have in common the new gift of life."² The incarnation is global, universal, exhaustive and sweeping for everything that was, everything that

² Walter Brueggemann, *Texts for Preaching, Year A*, p21.

is, everything that will be. The coming of Christ is good for the world, and that is good news indeed!

But not just to a creation straining under the weight of our sin, not just to a world groaning for transformation and restoration, but to individuals! Each and every one of us who have been transformed by Christ and bear witness to the related truth — *even as the coming Messiah is good for the world, the coming Messiah is good for the one*. As Isaiah reminds us, the coming of God isn't just good for any wilderness, but specific ones: Lebanon, Carmel, Sharon. The coming of God isn't just for any people, but for those weakened or enfeebled, those speechless or unsighted, those whose bodies and spirits and minds and hearts are immobilized with all that keep them from leaping and dancing and singing for joy. And as the gospels remind us, Jesus came and pitched his tent *particularly* — in a particular time, in a particular place, born to a particular woman, named by a particular man, seen and worshiped by particular witnesses, living among particular people with particular needs and particular possibilities. **Even as God-made-flesh changes the world on an expansive, cosmic level, God-made-flesh changes lives on an impossibly intimate level.** Martin Luther once said, “God became small for us in Christ.”³ And to me and you and your mother-in-law, your angsty teenager, the cynical coworker, the guy who's always at the bus stop, the friend whose marriage just fell apart, the exhausted caregiver whose days are filled with the monotony of daily living, this is good news indeed.

III.

³ A quote found through Rev. James Howell's blog about preaching Advent called “God Became Small,” <https://jameshowellsweeklypreachingnotions.blogspot.com/2017/09/god-became-small-preaching-advent.html>.

Every year as we revisit these texts, I am more and more convinced that there's not a more profound expression of this intimacy and particularity of the birth of Jesus than the 'with-ness' of God among us as Emmanuel. And especially as we read these texts when the state of things seems to fracture all around us, when fear is at fever-pitch, when anxiety is in the air we breathe and the water, when life is hard for everyone it seems — that's when I find myself like the little elementary schooler, fearful that Jesus will come back while we're outside, and we'll miss the whole thing!

But the good news of the gospel is not just that God came for the world and that God came for the one, but that God did it and came close, came near, dwelled with us! For not only was a baby born, but the baby was born to us and with us and among us! For not only did God come down, but God did so within the body of a woman, rooted in a family, a community, a people!

That's what we see in Mary — she who found favor with God, she who may have been encouraged as one whose belly strained and stretched as God grew within, she who broke her own body and shed her own blood so that the Savior of the world could enter in.⁴

That's what we see in Joseph — he who was asked to give the babe the name “Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins,” he who surely faced the grief and loss and anger of a life unfolding in ways he never anticipated, he who bore witness to Emmanuel by staying, by remaining with Mary, with Jesus, with God when he certainly didn't have to.

⁴ There are sermons upon sermons to be written about the bodily promise of the incarnation! I'd love to write those someday, but until then, I give thanks for this beautiful imagery sparked by my reading of Dr. James Howell's blog: <https://jameshowellsweeklypreachingnotions.blogspot.com/2017/09/god-became-small-preaching-advent.html>.

That's what we see in all who fill our nativities — in shepherds and sages, in angels and animals, to a people who have walked in darkness and now see a great light. And centuries later a half a world away, that's what we experience too — when we are overcome with the presence of God in the hospital room or around the family table, when we feel the comfort of being seen amidst a crowd or in a season of suffering, when we wonder with hopeful possibility when all evidence points to the contrary or when indifference roars in our ears, when we know and are known in all our particular, peculiar ways — and we find deep gladness in the truth that we are seen, we are known, we are loved, we are enough. That, my friends, is the 'with-ness' of God, pitching the divine tent and dwelling among us, full of grace and truth.

To come close, to bear with, to be with, to dwell with particular people in particular ways ... this must be love in its highest form.

IV.

I'm not sure I've ever seen a more powerful witness to the 'with-ness' of God than I did just this week, as I spent a morning with our friend Deb Watkins. Of course, Deb herself is a force — and everywhere we went, her incredible gifts of friendship and compassion were unmistakable. I felt popular just being with her, given the number of people stopping us for hellos and updates on their life she asked about and everything.

But then Deb took me to a place called Bio-Tech — not the gleaming Biotech Place building in the Innovation Quarter downtown, but BioTech Prosthetics and Orthotics, a medical center for amputees housed in a

nondescript building over amidst the row of medical centers on Hawthorne Road.

I confess, I'd never even noticed the place before, although I drive over that way often. In we went, Deb teaching me about their mission along the way. First thing I saw as we entered was the cheeky Christmas tree, twinkling with light and humor decorated in dozens of ornaments looking like the infamous "one-leg lamp" from the movie *A Christmas Story*. There were the doctors, nurses, and administrative assistants, all of whom got up from their work and came to greet Deb with hugs and words of affection. There was the bulletin board bearing pictures of Deb and many other amputees in various stages of activity – some in physical therapy, others water-skiing or playing with their kids. One picture showed a large smiling group of folks – perhaps 30 or so – all who had experienced some sort of physical amputation.

"That's my group!," Deb tells me proudly.

"What group is that?," I wonder aloud.

"My Thursday group! You know how the church is my family? Well that's my family too, these folks right there," Deb continued. The Thursday group, it seems, is a support group for amputees and caregivers that gathers at the Sticht Center for a fellowship meal and time of conversation. They've talked about everything from sharing tips on how to move through daily tasks like laundry or errands, to how to manage the depression and isolation that comes for so many after they experience amputation. "That group has saved me," she tells me.

About that time, Deb greeted a man also in the waiting room and struck up a conversation. We learned that he was a new amputee, and was

struggling emotionally – feeling stuck at home, confined to the relationships in his most immediate vicinity, unable in his grief to imagine what new life could look like. Without skipping a beat, Deb began to bear witness to the intimate ‘with-ness’ of God that she experiences in community and that she’d experienced through BioTech.

“Now you can’t do that!,” she said to him with a smile. “You got to get out, you got to keep going. Come to our Thursday group – you’ll see that you’re not alone, that we’re all here for each other.” Several others had overheard this conversation and began chiming in with their own witness about the importance of the group in their lives – what they’d learned from each other, how the group helped them find their way through loss and anger and fear back to themselves, how over time a company of strangers became a family in which they are known and loved, how the group didn’t promise a quick fix, but rather healed on a deeply restorative level.

In the twenty or so minutes I listened into this conversation, Deb must have told the guy a half a dozen times to the Thursday group – some with gentle invitation, others with a steely insistence – “now listen – I better see you at Thursday group!” And you know what? Just before worship began this morning, I asked Deb if the guy from the waiting room showed up on Thursday night. And with a grin, she whooped and said, “I told him he better come, so of course he did! And he brought his mama! You know, we didn’t even talk about our problems, we just shared love with each other.”

There in that waiting room, this morning in the Sanctuary talking with Deb, Then and now, I can’t help but to hear the steady whisper of the Spirit,

breathing and moving and voicing what sounds to my ears like “Emmanuel, Emmanuel, Emmanuel... God with us.”

V.

Friends, as we find ourselves this Christmas season worrying about Jesus, “Is Jesus going to come, and we’re going to miss him? Will he come when we’re not here?,” we’ll hear the words of God – looking, knowing, seeing us – and saying, “my darling children, a love this profound cannot be missed!”

Amen.