

Week 4

GOD IS WITH US

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, ‘God is with us’” (Matthew 1:23).

You are loved.

No, really.

That’s it.

That is the message of Advent, Christmas – the entirety of the gospel story, in fact.

You are loved.

In the baby – whose name shall be Emmanuel, which means “God is with us” – God has drawn near to humanity in familiarity, intimacy and even identity. God has become human, entering into our world and our very existence. And the message God has brought? You are loved.

Two thousand years of Christian history, and yet that basic message has not changed. God has drawn near, and the message brought to all creation is "you are loved." Scripture is filled with stories of God speaking to God's people. Sometimes God speaks to them directly. Moses approaches a burning bush and hears God "informing him, 'I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt'" (Exodus 3). In the middle of the night, Samuel hears God calling his name (1 Samuel 3). At other times, God speaks through the prophets to the people.

But here ... in this manger ... in this moment ... on this night ...

There is no mountain-splitting, quaking prelude like Elijah heard outside his cave (1 Kings 19). There is no opening in the heavens, no descending Spirit, no voice from the clouds (Luke 3.) The baby in the manger is God's whispered good news: "You are loved."

In the first session of this study, we read a sampling of modern-day billboards warning us of God's coming wrath. The writings of our biblical ancestors reflect a similar level of trepidation about the day God would draw near. What judgment might befall them when God arrived? What word might God speak?

In the manger in Bethlehem, God did show up. And the word was "love."

As gospel people, the church proclaims this message: "You are loved." Obviously, such a simple message doesn't give us the directives that are to be taken in the many complex situations in which the church finds itself in daily life. Such a simple message does not give us all that we need to make the many minute decisions that organizations and individuals must make. But it does give us a clear message and identity.

Who is the church? *The beloved of God.*

Who is my neighbor? *The beloved of God.*

Who is this stranger in my midst? *The beloved of God.*

To be the church, to be people of the gospel, called to spread the good news, is to ensure that every person we encounter leaves knowing they are loved. To be “evangelical” is to be sharers of the good news – and that good news is that we are loved by the very creator of the universe.

This almost seems too simple, and in some ways it might be. But how often does the message the world sends us undermine our confidence in this message? How often are we told that we must make ourselves lovable enough, work hard enough, look good enough, decide wisely enough, or behave appropriately enough to merit the concern or consideration of others around us?

The church has a different message: You are loved because the One who created you has marked you as loved. Christ-centered ministries have this message of Christ at their heart.

Rain or shine, the East Boston Community Soup Kitchen opens each Tuesday without fail, serving up nutritious fare – with an extra helping of love – from the basement of Our Saviour’s Lutheran Church. Volunteers offer weekly breakfast, lunch and dinner to more than a hundred guests, many of whom face the challenges of poverty and addiction. Guests can also pick up hygiene kits or a set of clean clothes and access social services.

“This space is where we all come together and treat each other with love, with that respect and dignity that we all like to receive,” says Sandra Aleman-Nijjar, the kitchen’s lead volunteer. “We give that to everyone that walks through those doors.”

Eddie, one of the guests at East Boston, knows this to be the case. Having lived on the streets since he was 18, Eddie calls the ministry “my home,” a place of belonging and acceptance where his needs – physical, spiritual and emotional – are met. “He feels loved, that someone cares,” says Sandra. “You can see it in [each of] them, that sense of belonging, that sense of acceptance. That someone cares about them, that someone is watching and looking out for their well-being.”

To be “evangelical” is not merely to share the basic facts about faith but to live out a faith that assures us – and our neighbors – that we are loved. For guests at the East Boston Community Soup Kitchen, that means that every plate of food served is a form

of evangelism, a way of sharing the good news that is the very message of “Emmanuel”: you are loved.

God’s love calls us to active love and service of one another. Authentic love – the love God shows through Christ – sets tables where all are welcome, calls religious and political leaders to repentance for their treatment of neighbors facing poverty or vulnerability, and testifies to new life in the face of death-dealing powers. It is not merely a word spoken but a life lived, walking with and standing by our neighbors.

This is the Promised One we have been waiting for, and this is the message we have been longing to hear. Through Mary and Joseph’s journey to Bethlehem, through John the Baptist’s hours of ministry at the Jordan, through our expectant longing in Advent – this is the message we have been waiting for. And the message many of our neighbors continue to pine for.

You are loved.

Now, love one another.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1) **When during this season have you felt loved?**
- 2) **How does your congregation share the message “you are loved” with neighbors in your community?**
- 3) **Watch ELCA World Hunger’s video “East Boston Community Soup Kitchen” at <https://vimeo.com/293599869>. How does the ministry in East Boston help guests feel “that sense of belonging, that sense of acceptance”?**
