

Always Emmanuel

Fourth Sunday of Easter

April 25, 2021

Sermon, "Always Emmanuel" by Pastor Dave

Candice, Justin and I moved to Orion in July 2006. That fall, Jordan began his freshman year at the University of Iowa and Jonathan began his junior year at Augustana College, so neither of them ever really lived in Orion.

That wasn't the case, however, for Justin; that fall he entered fifth grade. One of my early goals was to pastor Orion United Methodist Church until 2014, because that's when Justin was to graduate from high school. We might have moved that year, except something happened in December 2013 which changed the trajectory of my pastoral career: the congregation purchased an old tool shed which was immediately adjacent to the church.

Over the course of the next year, we developed a plan for that old shed. Back in the mid-1980s, I spent some time as a weekend pastor; my steady job was working in the estimating department of a general contractor. I got the feeling that one day I would be involved in a church building program, so when Orion UMC purchased the old tool shed, it felt like I'd finally caught up with fate. Plus, I was excited to be a part of that project. And it gave me a 'missional reason' to stay there.

We completed renovations on the building in November 2016.

That was a great month: not only did we finish the activity center; but it was the same month that the Cubs won the World Series.

Orion's renovation project had been a wonderful challenge, but as the project wound down, I began to wonder what new challenge God might have for me.

I went to a Christian conference in Roseville where I stopped by a booth for Dubuque Theological Seminary. I picked up a brochure for their Doctor of Ministry program; it just felt right. I was losing interest in the convention, anyway.

The program would eventually include three week-long "Intensives" each May in 2017, 2018, and 2019. Throughout the rest of those years, there were books to read, papers to write and meetings held over Zoom. Folks would ask me about the classes I took for my D.Min. program; I said it wasn't a series of classes like I had in my bachelor's or master's programs; this was just one long class. And it lasted four years. But we covered a wide range of subjects, including philosophy, history, modernity, theology, and Bible. I don't mind telling you that when I began, I found that I was a bit rusty, and I struggled; it had been 19 years since I'd completed my master's program.

As I look back over these past four years, I know I've gained a lot through my D.Min. studies. One area is in my personal walk with God. I can be somewhat of a private person, so you might not see it, but I do. And I've reclaimed some of the spiritual practices that I'd either ignored or suppressed over the previous years. It might sound strange, but if a pastor isn't careful, the ministry has a way of squeezing your spirituality right out of you.

For one thing, it can be hard to separate personal devotions from sermon preparation. But more significantly, pastors have to deal with church people, and church people can say some of the cruelest things you can imagine. In fact, the most hurtful things ever said to me were said by so-called “godly Christians.” And some of the most ungodly people I’ve ever known have sat on church boards. And their hurtful words scar me to this very day.

Thankfully, I’ve not experienced any of that here at Aledo UMC. Thanks be to God.

Some people refuse to go to church because they say it’s full of hypocrites. So they stay home. One young man decided to sleep in one Sunday morning. His mother went into his room and said, “You have to get up and get ready for church.”

“I’m not going to church today,” he said as he hunkered down under the covers.

“Oh really? Give me two good reasons why you’re not going to church today.”

“Number one: I don’t like them. And number two: they don’t like me.”

“Well, I’ll give you two good reasons why you are going to church today. Number one: because I’m your mother and I say so. Number two: because you’re the pastor!”

Pastors don’t have that luxury of staying home to avoid the hypocrites. We have to go to church and try to minister to all God’s people, including those hypocrites. And sometimes the Holy Spirit whispers to a pastor that he or she is one of those hypocrites.

Thankfully, my studies have given me a better perspective on such matters. My studies have also shown me what the average mainline church in America is experiencing. And my studies have drawn me back to Christian practices and shown me that our practices are what connect us to God. Some people think that it’s our beliefs which connect us to God, but beliefs without practices are empty. Practices are how we put our beliefs into action. It’s the old faith versus works debate. And its practices which keep us from devolving into hypocrites.

Practices are also an important part of the thesis to my dissertation: “As I lead a group of Christians through a journey of practices...we will begin to discover that God is already at work in our neighborhoods and be better able to join God in what God is already doing in our community.”

That’s why I was so energized when I was appointed to this church: We have a mission statement which says **We exist to connect people to Jesus Christ**. And I have observed that this congregation has fully bought into that mission statement. But its not just beliefs that connect us to Christ, it’s our practices. And my studies have brought me back to that realization and given me a renewed appreciation for Christian practices because that’s what connects us to Jesus Christ and keeps us connected to Jesus Christ. Practices are how we follow Jesus. We call those practices the means of grace.

And yet, some people don’t want to connect with God.

I think one of the saddest passages in the Bible is found in Exodus 20, immediately after God gave the Israelites the Ten Commandments through Moses.

¹⁸ When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance ¹⁹ and said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.”

²⁰ Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.”

²¹ The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.

God had just delivered them from cruel slavery. God was sustaining them in the wilderness with water and manna and quail. God was forming them into a nation. But the Hebrews did not want to get close to God. How that must have hurt the heart of God!

My studies have given me a new appreciation for what I believe is the eternal purpose of God, which I believe is to “be with” humanity.

This past Thursday was Earth Day, so in my online prayer meeting I read *The Creation* by James Weldon Johnson. As the poet imagines it, the Creator “rolled the light around in his hands until he made the sun.” God “spat out the seven seas; he batted his eyes and the lightnings flashed. He clapped his hands and the thunders rolled.” He created the “fishes and fowls and beasts and birds (which) swam the rivers and the seas, roamed the forests and the woods, and split the air with their wings.” But then, in the words of the poet, “God said, I’m lonely still.” And then God created humankind.

“Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a human being.”¹ Or, as the poet puts it, “Like a mammy bending over her baby, kneeled down in the dust, toiling over a lump of clay, ‘till he shaped it in his own image.” In other words, God was willing to get dirt under his divine fingernails.

“Then into it he blew the breath of life, and man became a living soul.”²

Of course, as the story unfolds for us in Genesis 3, Adam and Eve both ate of the grapefruit tree.

⁷ Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

⁸ Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. ⁹ But the LORD God called to the man, “Where are you?”

Even though Adam and Eve had broken trust with God, God still sought them out because God wanted to be with them. And that’s been the story ever since: God just wants to be with us; but we keep avoiding God and hiding from God. We’re like puppies stuck in a cage at the dog pound. Then God comes and rescues us and takes us home that we might be with him. But instead, we keep hiding from our Master. Quite frankly, that’s not the behavior one would expect from a dog.

Most dogs want just two things in life: they want food, and they want to be with their master. Oh, and a seat on your sofa.

That may be one reason why God gave us dogs: so they might show us what it means to “be with” our Master.

¹ Genesis 2:7.

² <https://poets.org/poem/creation?fbclid=IwAR0iJUVNzEQ-GntoF4-3rW8aUda7pMqbWkSCiZb4KOdNNS6QyTbexGp6AKc>

Every Advent and every Christmas we celebrate the birth of Jesus as our Emmanuel, God with us. In Matthew 1, Joseph learned that his fiancé was expecting a baby, and he knew he couldn't possibly be the father. One night, the angel of the Lord appeared to him and said:

“Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

“El” is Hebrew for God; “manu” means “with;” and “Em” is us. It might look like “Us with God, but remember, the Hebrews wrote right to left, hence, Emmanuel...God with us. Always. God wants to be with us always, not just at Christmastime, but all year long. And God wants to be with us always, not just in this life, but in the next.

The ultimate example of God “being with” humanity is the Incarnation, in which the Son of God “became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” ³ Through the Incarnation, God became one of us, lived among us, and moved into the neighborhood of human experience. It was “a self-emptying posture of radical solidarity” among us.⁴

God's desire to “be with” us is seen early in the ministry of Christ. In Mark 3:14,

¹⁴ He appointed twelve that they might **be with** him and that he might send them out to preach ¹⁵ and to have authority to drive out demons.

The primary reason Jesus appointed his disciples was so they might “be with” him. Every other reason is secondary to that reason. Christ wants to be with us. It's why he came to earth. It's why he suffered and died. It's why he conquered the grave and rose from the dead, that we might “be with” him in this life and through all eternity.

How do you suppose you might respond to that? God wants to “be with” you. That's his eternal plan from the Creation of the world. God simply wants to “be with” you. So how are you going to react to God's eternal plan? Are you going to “be with” God?

³ John 1:14.

⁴ James, Christopher B., *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, 143-144.