

God With Us (Immanuel)

Sermon for Upper Hutt Uniting, 17 December 2023, by Silvia Purdie



The big idea of Christmas is that God has come to be with us.

The big promise of the Bible is that God will be with us ... here and now, for the rest of our days, and for all time and beyond.

The promise is flagged in the prophecy of Isaiah, that the virgin will bear a son and he shall be called Immanuel, God With Us.

This morning we have tried to hold in our memories some Bible verses which plant this deep within us. God is with us.

But ... preachers always have to explore the 'but' ... but what do we mean by that?

Like, OK, thanks God, you're here, you are with us, but, um, so what?

God is not with us in a tangible way. Not like a dog who is always there tangling your feet and sprawling across your lap when you sit on the sofa.

God is not with us like we keep our cellphones with us, making noises in our ears or flashing pictures in our eyes.

God is invisible. God is intangible. God is very very quiet.

So if this is true, that God is always with us, in what ways is this true?

I wonder what you mean by this, for yourself?

What difference does the presence of God make?

I've been pondering this for myself, and I have come up with three answers to this question. Three ways I picture this in my mind.



First, God is with us like music is around us. I am a musician, and I have always liked the idea that God is like the most amazing wonderful music, if only my ears could hear it.

When do you notice music playing, when you are out and about?

... supermarket, shops, annoying blaring carols, a busket, a passing car?

Different sounds create a different atmosphere

... how about a chainsaw or a digger or a crazy loud motorbike?

I think that if God was not present then the world would feel totally dead, flat, just crashing unconnected sounds in which nothing would make sense.

Because God is with us, there is, flowing through everything, the possibility of hope, of peace, of joy and of love. These things are singing through the universe. If only we have ears to hear them. Or maybe we don't need ears. God is like a vibration that we sense in other ways, somewhere in our gut, or through the soles of our feet.

And when our lives are focused on Jesus and open to the Holy Spirit then every part of our lives come into tune with God's song, and other people catch an echo of God from us, in all sorts of ways.

Yes?



Second, God is with us through the possibility of conversation. I believe that God is always communicating with us, all the time. Not just in the general background music kind of way, but in specific ways, to me, to you, to each person. I believe that it is easier than you think it is to hear from God. We are pretty good in the church of training each other to talk to God. We pray, we practice prayers of thank you and sorry and please. Lord, hear our prayer, we say in church. Which to me is the most pointless thing we could possibly pray. Of course God hears us. We don't need to ask him to hear us. What we should be asking God is to teach us how to hear him. Yes, of course, we can and should talk to God all the time. God is the unseen friend at every table, our companion when we're shopping or lying awake in bed in the night. Always there. Always listening.

And also, always communicating. I'd love your prayer life this summer to become more of a two-way than a one-way conversation. And in my preaching next year I'd like to focus more on this. Because there are some skills involved, from our side. Skills like practicing stillness in our minds. Skills like trusting our instincts, what we know deep down to be true. Skills like following your hunches and releasing your imagination. Skills like relaxing, letting your guard down, , wasting time and playing. These kinds of things help us hear what God is saying to us, and trust that, and let that shape who we are and what we choose to do with our time.

Are you up for that?

God is with us as a constant conversation.



And third, lastly, even more than background music, even more than conversation, God is with us through the amazing things that God is doing in the world all around us all the time. So my last picture is signs of God at work.

God is at work making life possible, every form of life on the planet, every colour, every drop of water, every bud, every beautiful moment, could not and would not happen without God.

But more than God's work as Creator and Sustainer of all, God is at work in countless other ways, calling out faith, creating connections of love and community. And in specific ways, a little blessing, something good or unexpected. Even when we experience loss and injustice and rejection, still God is at work even in the pain.

Some things make it harder for God to do what God loves to do. Unfortunately, worry and anxiety is one of those things. The more we stress, the harder it is for God to bless us. This is partly why we come to church on a Sunday, to hand it all over to God, because that makes room for God to take it all and use it all. That makes room for Jesus to be born in us.

When we hold the bread in our hands in a moment, that asks of you, for that moment, to just do that. Push aside all the worries in your mind and only hold that bread and let the simplicity of a small piece of bread be all that you know. And the beauty of a little cup of grape juice. That is all the life you need this morning. That answers all your problems and meets all your needs because here and now we surrender everything to God, who came as a tiny baby into the manger mess of life, to do what God wants to do.

God is at work. Give him space to do it.

Trust Jesus to do the work in you, and in your family, that God wants to do.

God is with us through signs of God at work.

As we share Communion this morning may you hear the music of God swelling in your soul. May you trust what God is saying to you and share your life fully with him. And may you make space for what God is doing in your life by letting go your worries and trusting him with curiosity and expectancy.

God is with us. God is in you. God is with us. Amen.