

Is God With Us?

A few months ago I filled in for Pastor Christine and preached her sermon titled “Noah and the Flood”. After the service a young man asked me for the text of the sermon which I provided him. Later he asked me a simple question of “how do we know God is with us?”. My response was a well thought out, very theologically based answer that went something like; “uuuh...hmmm...well...” The simplicity, but the true depth of the question had me stumped. My answer certainly could have been “because the Bible says so” but I think he was looking for more. As I pondered his question I concluded there were possibly two questions; one is “How do we know God is with all of us, people in general or in total”. The other question may have been “How do I know God is with me?” Knowing the individual presence of God. The question, or the two questions, and my inability to provide a basic answer has been on my mind ever since. So today, I am going to address the first question of “How do we know God is with Us?”. I believe that many of us at times have this same question. How can we believe that God is with us when such horrible things happen around us. When wars rage on causing the deaths of innocents, and cause people to leave their homes to seek safety in distant lands. When government leaders only seek power and wealth without concern for those they vowed to protect. When Christians are targeted, driven out and murdered in horrible ways. When we hear of religious leaders who commit unspeakable atrocities. When we know of faithful people that lose their possessions, their families perish and their friends desert them. These things make us wonder how can God be with Us and not do something about this. But, these things aren’t just from our headlines, the items I mentioned are all events from the Bible. Our Jewish and Christian forefathers had the same experiences we have today and they had the same question.

Hear the words of the Prophet Habakkuk

"How long, Lord, must I call for help,
but you do not listen?
Or cry out to you, “Violence!”
but you do not save?
Why do you make me look at injustice?
Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?
Destruction and violence are before me;
there is strife, and conflict abounds.
Therefore the law is paralyzed,
and justice never prevails.
The wicked hem in the righteous,
so that justice is perverted."

Pretty strong words of frustration but we know the Prophet Habakkuk, King David, Isiah and so many others while expressing frustration with God, ultimately rest their faith and hope in knowing that the Sovereign God is with them. So how did they and we know that? Lets go back to the beginning.

In the beginning God created the heavens and earth. God created everything! He said "Let Us make mankind in our image". When God completed the act of creation he said "it is good!" Then comes along sin, and we learn that the consequences of sin are death. We scroll forward a few generations and come to Noah and his family. We see in this story a first-hand account of how sin leads to death. Not just to the worst of mankind, but to nearly all of mankind. But Noah and his family are spared. Although Sin is not gone! Noah and his family are broken human beings just like you and me. But, God sets a new stage. God puts them in charge. God makes a covenant with them and with us, to be with us. No longer will there be a wave of judgement over sin. Scroll forward again a few generations and we come to Abram. Abram at the time is nobody special. Yet God selects Abram, soon to become Abraham, He selects him to become a great nation. Most importantly God says "ALL people on earth will be blessed through you". Abraham and Sarah amazingly become the parents of Isaac and eventually the forbearers of the people of Israel. We see in the stories of the Old Testament how God guides and protects the people of Israel. At times, like in the desert, He leads them with fire. At other times he guides them through the words of the Prophets. In these stories we see, time and time again, that Israel is almost wiped out. But God continues to protect and restore them. We, with the position of being able to look back, know the Jews survived against all odds. But if you were to go back to the time of Abram, how much would you have bet on their chances to survive as a people for over 4,000 years. God made a covenant with Abram and God had a plan. No matter what the people of Israel did nor what their enemies tried to do, God would assure that "all people on earth will be blessed through" Abram and that from Israel would come the "Light of the World".

So at the proper moment, God became flesh and dwelt with us. The ultimate "with us". Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary; was flesh, bone and blood. He was a completely helpless baby, just like we were. He had a childhood being completely reliant on God and his family for his food, shelter, safety and security. When he grew to be a man and at the right time he started his ministry. Jesus tells us "I did not come to judge the world, but to save it". God so wants to be with us and for us to be with him that he sent Jesus to do everything necessary to make that happen. Jesus came as the Light of the World. Jesus told us about the power of God and he showed us by driving out demons. Jesus told us about God's Kingdom and showed us by eating at the table with sinners and outcasts. Jesus told us about the compassion of our God and he showed us by healing the blind, the leper, the lame. Jesus told us about God's plan for the final restoration of His creation and showed us by raising people from the dead. Jesus told us about

forgiveness and on his cross, being brutally tortured he said “God forgive them...” Jesus gave up his power, his life, his soul for God to be with us.

After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples and told them “go and make disciples of all nations”, “preach the gospel to all nations”, “feed my lambs”, “take care of my sheep”. Then before ascending into heaven he said to them “gone on, get on with it, get to work”. No, he knew “you can’t do this by yourself; I know you; I know what you are capable of and what you aren’t”. He told them “Do not leave Jerusalem....in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit”. The Holy Spirit is the gift from the Father; the power of God that works through the hands and feet and mouths of his children. I believe in this day, the best way to see and to know God is with us is through witnessing the power of the Holy Spirit working through others. When orphans are cared for, when people uproot their lives to move to difficult places to help those in need, when people patrol the coasts to prevent anymore immigrants from droning, when people work to provide food to those without, when anyone reaches out a helping hand in the name of Jesus that is the Holy Spirit at work. That is God being with us. When you read about, or have the blessing to talk to people who have given up their lives to help others in this way; most of them will say they could not have done it by themselves. There was some other power strengthening them and guiding them in this work. I want to turn around the verses from the Gospel of Matthew that we heard regarding the Sheep and the Goats. In verse 40 Jesus says “The King (Jesus) will reply, ‘Truly, I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did to me.’” We get so caught up in deciding if we are the sheep or the goats, we don’t realize most of the time we are the “least of these brothers and sisters” The Spirit of the Lord is working through the sheep to minister to us; us the least of these. That is how we see God being with us. Through the hands, hearts, compassion and caring of the sheep.

I heard and then read the story about the founding of Bethel Gospel Assembly. Bethel is now a large church in Harlem, New York City. In 1916, two young girls - Mae Allison and another young girl, after becoming Christian applied for membership at a downtown church in New York City. They were refused membership because they were black. A young German member of the church, Lillian Kraeger, learned of this and suggested that they hold cottage meetings near their home in Harlem. Lillian traveled from her safe, comfortable home to Harlem to give leadership to the Bible Study classes. As a result of this her family and the young man to whom she was engaged rejected her. Because she was following the call and Spirit of Christ to make disciples. This may bring to your mind those difficult verses in Matthew Chapter 10, one of which says “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me”. The Holy Spirit worked through Lillian and she stuck with it. Those little cottage meetings became a church and that church has thrived for over 100 years, touching 10s of thousands of lives. All from God working through Lillian and her being with those two young Christian girls.

Similarly, I heard the following story from a sermon preached by Pastor Paris Reidhead in 1965

There was an island in the West Indies where an atheist British owner had 2000 to 3000 slaves. And the owner had said, "No preacher, no clergyman, will ever stay on this island. If he's ship wrecked we'll keep him in a separate house until he has to leave, but he's never going to talk to any of us about God, I'm through with all that nonsense."

Two young Moravians in their early twenties heard about it. They sold themselves to the British planter and used the money they received from their sale, to pay their passage out to his island for he wouldn't even transport them. As the ship left its' pier in the river at Hamburg and was going out into the North Sea carried with the tide, the Moravians had come from Herrnhut to see these two lads off. Never to return again, for this wasn't a four year term, they sold themselves into life time slavery. Simply that as slaves, they could be as Christians where these others were. The families were there weeping, for they knew they would never see them again. And they wondered why they were going and questioned the wisdom of it. As the gap widened and the housings had been cast off and were being curled up there on the pier, one lad with his arm linked through the arm of his fellow, raised his hand and shouted across the gap the last words that were heard from them, they were these, "MAY THE LAMB THAT WAS SLAIN RECEIVE THE REWARD OF HIS SUFFERING!"

The people, the parents were there at the dock weeping. This wasn't a planned, safe, church mission trip. This was the Holy Spirit working within ordinary Christians to complete the Great Commission of preaching the Good News and taking care of the Lord's sheep.

When I decided to use this example in this sermon I did a little research. It turns out the story as preached was slightly embellished. The two young men were heard from again. They did return from their time in the West Indies. You may recall in the sermon a few weeks ago that Alec Clelland preached that he mentioned that John Wesley was greatly influenced by the Moravians. Guess who one of those Morvians was. Yes, it was one of these two young men, David Nitschmann. It was the working the Spirit leading those two young men to the West Indies, through their experience they, in concert with the Holy Spirit, could touch something deep in John Wesley's soul, leading to the establishment of the Methodist Church and ultimately us being together here as a Methodist congregation. God is with us and will always be with us.

So God selected a people to be a blessing to all nations. He was with them, directed, guided and protected them. All part of His plan. Then at the proper time, the Son of God came to be with us in flesh and blood. To tell us about the Father, to show us his compassion, mercy and love. And, finally to do what was necessary for us to be with God for all eternity. But that wasn't the

end. The Holy Spirit continues to be in the world being the hands and mouths of God until the final restoration of creation. So, Father, Son and Holy Spirit being with us through history and being with us today and forever more.

I want to make one final point about how we know God is with us. Most of you know that I have two daughters. What most of you don't know is that I was adopted as a baby. My birth mother didn't want a baby at that time of her life and give me up for adoption. I was blessed to be adopted by a loving family that provided me a wonderful life. The point of telling you this is these two young women are the only two people I know that are biologically related to me. That was an amazing revelation to me when I first realized that fact. I don't understand it but biological relation creates a special bond, a unique connection. God has that same connection with us. Us, as in you, me and everyone else in the world. Like everything in the universe, we were created by Him. In many ways we're no different than a rock, a flower or a fish; all part of creation. But, we were created in his image. We are not God, we can't, no matter how we try, be God but we are in his image. There is some part of God in us, we are in some way related to him. God is a communal God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God created us to be in communion with Him. We know he is with us, because we know He wants us to be with him. He was with us as the pillar of fire in the desert, he was with us when he came down to dwell with us in the person of Jesus Christ and He is with us when His Spirit leads and empowers people to do His will here on earth. In the story of the prodigal son, Jesus tells us about His Father, our God. Our God is a Father, that seeing us in the distance, lifts up the hem of his robe and comes running to us to welcome us home.

May you see in big things and little things that God running after you.