



***The Questions of Christmas:
“FOR OR WITH?”***

Rev. Laurie Haller
First United Methodist Church
Birmingham, Michigan
Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

In 1997, I went on my first international mission trip to Cuba. It was after Gary and I had been serving at First United Methodist Church in Grand Rapids for a few years. Our Missions Committee wanted to develop a long term relationship with a Methodist church in another country, which would complement a partnership initiated a few years before with an inner city elementary school in Grand Rapids. Our committee chose Cuba because our goal was to take yearly intergenerational teams, and we wanted the airfare and travel time to be doable.

In addition, Cuba was an intriguing country, only accessible to educational and religious groups who had visas and a license from the U.S. government. It’s also interesting that religious groups entering Cuba were not permitted to function as work teams. We couldn’t build anything or remodel anything. All we could do was hang out together. And we could bring along clothing, shoes and medical supplies, if they weren’t confiscated at customs in Havana.

I was part of the first team that went to our new sister Methodist church in Herradura in April 1997. I took our two daughters, Sarah, who was in tenth grade, and Talitha, who was in fifth grade. Both girls were taking Spanish in school. At first, some people from the church were dismayed because we weren’t going to do anything “for” the people of this very poor town of Herradura. “Why would you spend all that money to go to Cuba when you can’t work or help them?”

You know what we learned? By simply hanging out *with* our new Cuban friends, by forming relationships, by worshipping and dancing with them, by playing soccer together, by jumping into waterfalls together and slaughtering chickens for dinner with them, and by being inspired by their courage and joy in the midst of very difficult living conditions, our faith was strengthened in ways that we will never forget. The Methodists in Herradura taught us more about discipleship than we could have ever taught them. What we discovered is that simply being present *with* the Methodists in Herradura was much more important than anything we could have ever done *for* them.

For or with? It's one of the most critical questions of Christmas. Our scripture from Matthew chapter one is very familiar. It relates how Mary has been engaged to Joseph, and they are legally married. The marriage is only completed, however, when the bride is taken into the groom's home. Until that happens, the bride remains in her father's home, and no sexual relations are allowed.

Before the marriage is consummated, however, Mary is found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph does not know the cause of the pregnancy and assumes that she has been unfaithful. Matthew says that Joseph is a righteous man, which means that, according to the dictate of Jewish law, he must divorce her. Joseph resolves to do it quietly, however, without exposing Mary.

Then an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and says, "It's okay to keep Mary as your wife. The child growing in her womb is from the Holy Spirit, and you are to call him Jesus, because he is going to save the people from their sins." Matthew says that all of this is a fulfillment of the words of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, who said, "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us.'" (Isaiah 7:14) After Joseph wakes up, he does as the angel says and takes Mary as his wife. They have a son and name him Jesus.

The word Emmanuel, which is one of my very favorite words in the Bible, does not contain a verb in either the Hebrew or the Greek. The Hebrew word *immanu* means "with us," and *El* is a shortened form of the word God. So it literally means "God with us."

There are two ways of interpreting this Hebrew word Emmanuel. For the prophet Isaiah, the role of Emmanuel doesn't have any supernatural significance. His name is simply a sign, it's a promise that God is going to be with the nation of Israel because this human figure, the Messiah, will empower and help Israel through its struggles with other countries.

Matthew, however, reinterprets Isaiah 7:14 to understand Emmanuel as much more than a human being. Do you remember at the very end of the gospel of Matthew when Jesus is about to ascend into heaven after the resurrection? He says to his disciples, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." For Matthew, Emmanuel means "Jesus is God-with-us." Jesus is God with you and God with me.

For or with? You see, it wasn't enough for God to simply be *for* us as humans, to encourage and cheer us on from afar. Two thousand years ago God decided that the only way for you and me to be instruments of God's peace, justice and love on this earth was for God to become one of us, to send Jesus to be God *with* us, in the flesh, to show us the way through his life, death and resurrection.

Samuel Wells is the vicar, or pastor, of St. Martin-in-the-Fields church in central London. Wells points out in his new book, *The Nazareth Manifesto*, that a huge portion of the gospels — in fact, 34%, or 30 out of the 88 chapters of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John — is devoted to the last week of Jesus' life: his passion, death and resurrection. Thirty-four percent of the gospels talk about that last week.

Wells writes, "Jesus spent a week in Jerusalem *working for* us, doing what we can't do, achieving our salvation." Before that Jesus spent two or three years traveling around Galilee, "*working with* his disciples, teaching and training them to live in the kingdom he told them he was breaking in."¹

But what about the thirty years before that? What was Jesus doing for his first thirty years? Why, he was simply hanging out. "Before Jesus ever got into working *with (us)* and working *for (us)*, he spent thirty years in Nazareth *being with us*, setting aside his plans and strategies, and experiencing in his own body not just the exile and oppression of the children of Israel, but also the joy and sorrow of family and community life."²

The story of scripture is first and foremost the story of God's desire to hang out *with* us. Jesus spent thirty years *being with us*, living just like you and me, learning what it means to be human. Only then did he *work with* us, and, finally, *work for* us.

In a world where you and I often place highest value on serving, on doing and working for others, the season of Advent reminds us that the greatest joy of Christmas is that God simply wants you and me to hang out with God and with all the people of our world. In the same way, the greatest joy of being a disciple of Jesus Christ is more than just working *for* God to solve the problems of the world. When we know that God is not only *for* us but *with* us, then we are empowered to be not only *for* others but *with* others in a deeper way.

Learning to be *with*, to hang out *with* others in our families, our church, our city and our world, means accepting them for who they are, not as a means to an end. It's building relationships, connecting one on one. It's valuing each person as a child of God.

What if we could just hang out? What if we could simply *be with*, to sit beside the poor and chat? What if we didn't judge, patronize, stereotype, be condescending, fix or use others to satisfy our own guilt? What if we sought to simply learn about each other's lives, develop relationships and experience what it's like to be poor, oppressed, discarded and disempowered? What if *being with* helped us to recognize that sometimes we're part of the problem as well?

For or with? Being *with* is one of the most important things we can do right now in our country, as the recent terror attacks in Paris and San Bernardino remind us that we are one human

community. The fact that the shooters in both places were Muslims again raises our fears and heightens the assumption that all Muslims are terrorists and are to be feared.

In reality, many persons who we might assume to be Muslims because they are of Arab descent are actually Christians. According to the Arab American Institute, 63% of Arab Americans are Christian and 24% are Muslim. The Muslims in the Detroit area as well as around the country, no matter what religion they claim, are physicians, attorneys, athletes, business people, police officers and teachers, just like you and me.

While some may be afraid of Muslims, the Christian response is to embrace religious liberty, welcome diverse communities and seek to be *with*, to get to know and understand each other and discover that the vast majority of Muslims in our country are Americans citizens who hold the same values, hopes and dreams that we do. We cannot truly connect *with* others, shed our preconceptions and work *for* those who are different than us until we learn how to be *with*; to sit down at the same table to eat and drink, talk and learn, laugh and mourn and seek peace together.

A week ago this past Wednesday, First Church was represented at a meeting in Livonia of United Methodists who are interested in learning how we can assist in the resettlement of a projected one thousand Syrian refugees expected to arrive in the Detroit metro area next year. Our Bishop Deborah Kiesey released a letter last month in which she said, “Recent United Nations statistics tell us that three quarters of the Syrian refugees who are waiting to enter the U.S. are women and young children. As Christians we are called to welcome the stranger and to pay special attention and care to the widow, orphan, and foreigner – the most vulnerable members of our human family.” How might God be calling First Church to be *with* our refugee brothers and sisters?

For or with? I am utterly amazed at how this congregation makes a habit of being *with*, not just giving money to and doing things for but hanging out *with*, making friends and building bridges. The Cass Christmas party was a week ago last Thursday night. Oh, what a time we had hanging out *with* our Cass friends in the Fellowship Hall and the CLC. Santa even showed up!

Oh, what a time StreeThreads had preparing lunch for four hundred people at Central UMC in Detroit the Monday of Thanksgiving week, followed by one church family preparing an entire Thanksgiving meal for Central’s homeless population.

Oh, what a time you have at Art and Soul at Central UMC in Detroit, hanging out with people who do art together to bring beauty to our city and world. Oh, what a time some of you have with the children you tutor through Kids Hope.

Oh, what a time many of you had through Angel Tree, delivering Christmas gifts right to the homes of children where one parent is incarcerated, embodying God’s desire for you and me to share Christ’s love *with* as well as *for*. Oh, what a time our children had hanging out *with* the senior citizens in our church several Sundays ago. Oh, what a time you had volunteering at the Brightmoor One Stop Shop two weeks ago where 997 people were served. Oh, what a time you had purchasing gifts for the Methodist Children’s Home Society.

Oh, what a time our Tuesday morning women's book study had last week when our Martin Room assembly line put together over two hundred jam-packed Christmas stockings for the men, women and children at Cass. On Christmas Eve, Faith Fowler will personally hand out these stockings to the shelter residents, the one time of year when she is able to simply hang out *with* the guests. Faith says it's one of the most meaningful things she does all year.

For or with? Are we turning our world into a society full of products, gadgets, technology and energy, all of which make the world go round very effectively and do things for others but miss the heart and soul of humanity? Do we sometimes substitute things for presence, gifts for love, fixing for connecting with one another?

You know, I'm grateful that we couldn't do any work in Cuba, not that it's a bad thing to travel to other countries to volunteer in mission by working. It's critical to offer help in any way we can. However, if we had been building or remodeling all week in Cuba, we would have never really been able to hang out together *with* our Cuban brothers and sisters. And I suspect that my daughter Talitha wouldn't have gone back to Cuba three more times to hang out with her new friends.

My brothers and sisters, during this Christmas season, don't be so busy buying *for* that you can't spend time *with*. Don't be so intent on doing *for* others that you forget about simply hanging out *with* others. Being *with* in addition to doing *for* is the most effective way for the church to live out our mission as disciples of Jesus Christ. Being *with* creates a more faithful, just and whole society based on deep and abiding relationships. Being *with* is healing. Being *with* is transforming. Being *with* is learning. Being *with* is our call. Why? Because Jesus is Emmanuel: God with us. **For or with?**

¹ *The Nazareth Manifesto*, Rev. Dr. Samuel Wells, The Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University, April, 2008, p. 7.

² *Ibid.*