



Date: December 18, 2016

Title: "Jesus' Middle Name

Scripture: Matthew 1: 18-23

Description: The heart of the Christmas spirit is doing things for others. Only it isn't. The heart of the Christmas story is not about God doing "for", but about God being with. The child shall be named Emmanuel, which means "God with us." "With" is Jesus' middle name.

I want to describe three holiday celebrations and you tell me if any of them sound a little bit familiar. For extra credit, see if you can tell me what the three descriptions have in common.

The first is about your most difficult relationship in your family. Pick a name; let's say your father. You spent some time on line or even in the stores on Black Friday and your shopping list is completed. Even you are impressed! Except. Seven days remaining and you have no idea what to get your father. It's so frustrating, and it isn't even about the gift. You've never known what you could give or do that would make your father happy, especially happy about you. Still, you know you're going to find something, spend way too much, and grow even more frustrated because you know it's just throwing money at the problem and nothing is going to change.

Then next weekend it'll be the same as all the other occasions: when he opens his present you'll see his smile and accept his obligatory hug and his polite thank-you. But you'll privately know that you've failed again to really connect over the chasm between you.

Scene two: you have family from out of town plus a few close friends coming for Christmas dinner. Maybe even overnight. (Several nights?—let's not take this too far.) You want this to be perfect and you exchange a flurry of emails and texts about who's going to sleep where and whether it's alright for them to bring the dog. This week is a frenzy of shopping and baking and everybody telling you not to get so stressed. The kitchen becomes your private domain and in spite of everybody asking what they can do, it would be easier if they just stayed out of the way. You're the last to sit down at

the table and even then you're up to refill the gravy bowl and check on the pie in the oven. At the end of the day as you say goodbye to them, you hug and say, "It's a shame we never really talked. Let's get together soon." When they've left, you collapse in exhaustion.

Scene three: You stopped by the church's Angel Tree and selected a gift for a child who may only receive the one gift you purchase. On-line, you located it at Target and must have checked it "completed" on your to-do list, because last night when you intended to wrap it, you realized it was not in the house. Deadline this morning. You toss your spouse or kid the car keys with a description of the item and urgent instructions for a Target run. Two hours later—two hours!—they return...with the wrong item. You express your disappointment in a tone that may have been slightly raised. They respond at the level of a fire engine. Peace on Earth, good will among all. What do all those scenes have in common? I'd say they all three have one word at their center. The word is "for." All three are about doing something *for* people who are less fortunate, about fixing a Christmas dinner *for* the family, about getting something *for* Dad that will bring the two of you close. "For" isn't a bad thing at all. Let's give it up for the person who plans, arranges, and gets done what needs to get done. Let's also give it up for hospice nurses and special ed teachers and fire fighters who spend careers doing things for people. Let's give it up for people in love and playing Bryan Adams singing "Everything I do -I do it *for* you."

When we get into the Christmas spirit, we kick "for" into hyperspace. Scrooge leads the way, giving big charity donations *for* the community fund, then providing the largest turkey and lavish gifts *for* the Cratchit's. We know the drill, so we prepare a sumptuous dinner *for*. And our gifts *for* are not small-change items. The heart of the Christmas spirit is doing things *for* others.

Only it isn't. "For" isn't the way God does Christmas. God doesn't set the world right at Christmas. God doesn't shower us with good things at Christmas. God doesn't bestow blessings upon us and then get all disappointed when we open them up and fail to be sufficiently excited or grateful. "For" isn't what God does at Christmas.

Sometimes I wish it was. I'd love for God to make everybody happy and surround us with perfect things. I'd love for God to spare us believers from misfortune and hardship. I'd love for God to grant world peace. Now, that would be a Christmas gift!

But God isn't into "for." God offers something different, and perhaps far, far better. The advent angel says to Joseph, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, "God with us." (Matthew 1:23) In

John's gospel, we get this summary of what the heart of Christmas means: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among (with) us." (John 1:14) One word lies at the heart of Christmas. The word is "with." According to the Christmas story, Christ's middle name itself is "with", as in "Emmanuel—God *with* us."

Go back to the way John describes the very beginning of everything: "The Word was *with* God. He was in the beginning *with* God...Without him not one thing came into being." (John 1: 1-3) In other words, before anything was made, there was a *with*. The "with" between God and the Word, or between the Father and the Son. "With" is the most fundamental thing about God. The very core of God is "with."

Now, think about how Jesus concluded his ministry. His very last words in Matthew are, "Behold, I am *with* you always." (Matthew 28:20) In other words, "There will never be a time when I am not *with*." And at the very end of everything, in the book of Revelation, this is what the voice from heaven says, "See the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell *with* them as their God; they will be his disciples, and God himself will be *with* them." (Revelation 21:3)

We've found the most important word in the Bible—the word that describes the heart of God and the nature of God's purpose and the desire of God for us. That word is "with." That's why creation was formed; that's our ultimate destination; and that's why Jesus was born—for God to be *with* us and us *with* God.

As noble and unselfish as it is, the Christmas spirit as doing things *for* produces a lot of frustration as a side-effect, doesn't it. Cooking for, buying gifts for, offering charity for—all that is generous and kind. They're warm-hearted, admirable acts. But they just don't go to the heart of the problem. You give your father the perfect gift, but the chasm remains unspoken between you. You wear yourself out showing hospitality, but you don't have the conversation with the people you love. You are generous to charities, but the needy remain strangers in another world. "For" is a good thing, but it doesn't overcome misunderstanding, it doesn't overcome resentment, it doesn't overcome isolation.

In a lot of ways, "with" is harder than "for". You can do for without a conversation, without a real relationship, without changing anything about yourself. The reason your gift for your father falls short is not because it's wrong, because there's nothing wrong with generosity. It's because the only solution for you and your dad is for the two of you to be with each other long enough to hear each other's stories and tease out those countless misunderstandings and hurts that have frozen up your relationship and start down the path of getting beyond it. But simply being with each other not only requires

time, it requires risk, because it might all go terribly wrong and you could end up crucified. It happens.

Being a great host is an admirable goal for the holidays, even if you are exhausted and a tiny bit irritable when it's all over. It's probably a lot harder, though, to let everybody pitch in and contribute. That's harder because the gravy could get burned and you could end up with a dozen bowls of Brussels sprouts contributed by twelve different guests. But a dozen years from now you may have a story to laugh over, and you may have time to laugh with your family and guests this very year.

Let me point out a great irony. I wrote this sermon in a hospice room in Jacksonville, Florida. I was sitting by my brother, Jim, as he lay dying. When I arrived on Tuesday, he was already unconscious. Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday I sat with him and during the entire time he was unable to speak a word. Yet by the time he died on Thursday evening, I felt a closeness with my brother.... All we had during those three days was "with." No words, no shared experiences, no gifts exchanged. Simple presence with each other. Yet we grew so very close.

Like being at the core of God, "with" is at the core of all loving relationships. And that's why it's glorious, almost incredible good news that God didn't settle on "for." At Christmas, God said clearly and unambiguously, "I am with. Behold, my dwelling is with you always. My name is Emmanuel—God with us." With is Jesus' middle name.

I'm not saying God is never "for." When Jesus healed the lame and the lepers, that was "for." Christ died *for* our sins—I'm not about to throw that out. But God, at Christmas, becoming flesh in Jesus, has shown that there will never be a "for" that doesn't have a "with" at its heart.

So how do we celebrate the heart of Christmas? By being with people. The people you love but have a hard time connecting with. By being with the people who are grieving a loss especially around this season, being with them even when there's nothing to say. By being still with God in moments of quiet and silence rather than rushing around trying to save our little universes.

The way God chose to be with us. That's the wonder of Christmas. That's the amazing power of Jesus' middle name.

Amen.