

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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God-with-us and against?

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

We cherish the name Emmanuel. It feels like a warm blanket on a cold morning. God-with-us. Near to our grief. Steady in our fears. Close to our daily bread.

But the little preposition “with” has an edge. If you stand with the injured on the roadside, you stand against the forces that ran them off the road. If you stand with those pushed outside, you inevitably stand against the door that closed.

The Incarnation is not God floating above history. It is God choosing to be part of it. God entering the limits, constraints, and conflicts of human life. Not as a bystander. As a participant. If God is with those harmed by the current system, then God must be against the system that harms them.

This is Emmanuel's sharp grace: a holy presence that refuses neutrality. When Matthew introduces Mary and Joseph, the setting is a patriarchal world where a man's honor can surpass even a woman's life. The rules, both written and unwritten, teach neighbors to value reputation over mercy. In that world, a reasonable man might try to reduce harm without ever challenging the system that makes such harm possible.

Joseph initially considers that approach. He doesn't rush to the harshest option. His response is, by the culture's standards, reasonable. But reasonable is a low bar when a life is at stake. “Reasonable” keeps Joseph's reputation intact. It doesn't yet secure Mary's entire future.

So God steps in. In a dream, a messenger urges Joseph toward a righteousness that defies the double standard. Take Mary home. Name the child. Face the risk. Break the pattern that would dismiss her for the sake of his reputation.

Notice the sequence: before Joseph legitimizes anything, God has already drawn near. Before patriarchy offers a covering, God offers communion. Emmanuel does not wait for the paperwork to be neat. Emmanuel meets Mary while her story is still contested. Emmanuel stands with those dismissed as “illegitimate,” “misfit,” or “too complicated.” God is with the girl no one believes. God is with teenagers whose bodies become battlegrounds for other people’s decisions. God-with-Mary is God-against the system that would grind her down just to preserve a man’s pride.

Joseph’s conversion is genuine and costly. He shifts from being *reasonable* to *righteous*, moving from quiet avoidance to public solidarity. He understands that being with Mary means standing against the corrupt system that would consume her. That is the holiness the angel describes and that Joseph begins to embody.

Emmanuel is not a new word in Matthew. And neither is this pattern of resistance. It didn’t start with Joseph. It is the ancient fingerprint of God. Isaiah first spoke it to a terrified king named Ahaz, hemmed in by predatory powers. “God-with-us” was not a sentimental slogan; it was a sign that God stands against the imperial appetites that devour the vulnerable. Emmanuel reveals the false inevitability of conquest.

The New Testament emphasizes this resistance. When Paul greets the church by calling Jesus “Son of God” and “Lord,” he is reclaiming titles stolen by Caesar and returning them to their rightful owner. Saying “Jesus is Lord” means saying “Caesar is not.” Emmanuel exposes the empire’s theological lie: that domination is destiny and that “peace” can be bought with fear.

Matthew’s nativity is not rooted in peaceful domestic life. Herod’s Judea resembles a police state: surveillance, informers, secret prisons, and blood on the throne. In that world, the Holy Family learns subtle acts of resistance: protecting the vulnerable, practicing mutual care, listening for dreams that guide them past the machinery of death. They are not decorations for a mantle; they are a household of courage, an unconventional family surviving and even challenging a hostile system.

Emmanuel, then, is not a passive presence. It is the presence of resistance to what destroys life. If this is what “with” means for God, it is also what “with” means for us.

Solidarity involves risk. Accepting someone as they are means sharing the consequences they face. When the targets are attacked, those who stand with them may feel the shrapnel. Hospitality isn't just a vibe; it's a stance. It places our bodies, reputations, resources, and plans close to someone else's struggle.

God is not against people; God is against domination, against systems that decide who counts and who can be discarded. Against misogyny, misogynoir, and trans misogyny that crush holy image-bearers. Against the "reasonable" policies that protect institutions while putting neighbors in danger. God stands with whistleblowers who tell unwelcome truths and with those seeking care for their bodies in a world eager to control them. To say "Emmanuel" is to join God's alignment.

The struggle is real. Some seasons, it feels like the oppressors will take everything we have. Yet Emmanuel does not abandon the scene. God does not bless the machine. God plants communities of stubborn love: churches, households, friend groups turned families, who embody the future in the present by sharing, protecting, confessing, learning, and refusing to turn against one another.

Love is not less love because it resists. It is precisely love that says "no" to what kills and "yes" to what makes life possible.

Advent is a choosing time. If Emmanuel is more than a lyric, we have decisions to make.

- Will we be *reasonable people* who keep our hands clean and our heads down while the old order rolls on?
- Or will we be *righteous people* who apprentice ourselves to God's risky solidarity, even when it complicates our calendars, our budgets, and our standing?

Some of us come to church today carrying the pain of doors slammed in our faces. Some are healing wounds from systems that tell us we are too much, not enough, or not the right kind. Hear the good news: you are not alone. The Creator of the cosmos has crossed the picket line. The Child born to Mary is the sign that God has chosen a side: the side of life, the side of the hurt, the side that refuses to stay neutral when harm occurs.

So, church, take heart: God is with us, and therefore God stands against what dehumanizes us. God is with us, and therefore we can stand where God stands. God is with us, and therefore we can become a with-people: people whose presence is shelter, whose actions are protection, and whose love has a backbone.

This week, choose one concrete act of with-ness that carries cost:

- Make a phone call to help someone navigating a hostile system.
- Move money toward a neighbor on the edge.
- Put your name beside a name that gets scrutinized.
- Interrupt a “reasonable” policy with a righteous proposal.

And when fear rises, remember the dream that woke Joseph: do not be afraid to take Mary home. Do not be afraid to take the risk of love home. Do not be afraid to let Emmanuel sharpen your yes and steady your no.

Come, O come, Emmanuel. God-with-us.

Be with us, and make us a people who are with one another, and against all that harms your beloved world. Amen.