

Message Manuscript for “Love Lives Close”  
Delivered to Church for the Highlands  
Sunday, December 19, 2010

Are we alone or is there life elsewhere in the universe and beyond? Another news report<sup>1</sup> came out about the search for extra-terrestrial life. This one came out earlier this month, revealing the findings that seem to strongly point to an even greater chance that we are not alone in the galaxies. The article stated . . .

*NASA has discovered alien life - but it is right here on Earth. The announcement, at a press conference at the space agency's US headquarters early today, follows days of frenetic speculation that it was about to reveal the existence of life on another planet.*

*While the truth – an ‘alien’ bacterium lurking deep within a Californian lake – is rather closer to home, it markedly raises the odds of ET's existence.*

*The excitement lies in the bug's ability to eat and thrive on arsenic, one of the most toxic chemicals on the planet. It can even incorporate arsenic into its DNA, making it part of its very being.*

*All 'known' life requires six fundamental elements - carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen, phosphorous and sulphur - which provide the building materials for DNA, proteins and fats.*

*As every other form of known life uses phosphorus rather than arsenic as a key building block of its DNA, the find suggests that a second form of life is with us, right here on Earth and . . . The finding bolsters the ‘weird life’ theory coined by Paul Davies, a British-born professor of cosmology, also at Arizona State University. He says it is likely that life on Earth has evolved more than once – and the only reason we haven't found the impostors among us is that we don't know what we are looking for.*

This report and others like it continue to reveal our desire to know that we are not alone. We continue to wonder what is out there, considering the difference it would make to know that there is other life or to wonder what would happen if such life visited our planet.

And we have this need today, don't we? You and I need to know that we are not alone in this universe. God has revealed His presence to us. And yet we are still looking for God in our every day lives. Like the scientist in this story said, “*the only reason we haven't found the impostors among us is that we don't know what we are looking for.*” There are things we do on the outside that show this, with the ways we consume, inhale, exhale, spend, drink, use and, dare I say it in the season of rich desserts, eat.

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<http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/nasa-finds-alien-life-on-earth/story-fn6bm6am-1225965368705>

And then there are the ways that don't necessarily manifest on the outside, but we are deep down wanting to know; wanting to believe that God is with us in our lives right now.

The message we hear from the Scripture readings this morning is that God is with us and that we can find discover Him. These readings today and the ones we will hear and ponder on Christmas eve are really all about Emmanuel, God with us.

This is what God was wanting the people of Israel, deep in the despair of exile, to hear; that there would be a sign that God was with them. *Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. . . Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.* Isaiah and his people, living physically far from where they thought God to be, could know that God was coming near. All of this through a sign. Just hearing the news that He was coming to be with them made Him close. They were coming to know that God was a God of close proximity. God wanted to be near to them.

Joseph and Mary would also learn how close God was to them. Joseph would know it intellectually as he heard the words in a dream, from the mouth of an angel. As Matthew described it, *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."* Mary heard these words too from an angel, but she would know the reality of the proximity of God not just intellectually, but physically. She truly felt God's presence in the depths of her being. And Matthew understood Jesus' birth to be the sign that Isaiah prophesied about long ago, quoting it here in his Gospel to remind his readers of the significance of it all. God had come near.

We may say this Christmas season, "That's all very well that all of this happened long ago in Bethlehem and that shepherds and angels and stars and sheep and Joseph and Mary were experienced all of this, but what about today? What does all of this mean for me?" How am I supposed to understand this in my city, with my problems, in my context? I mean, every year people drag their plastic baby Jesus nativities out on their lawns, but this is far different than believing God is actually with us today. If that's you, if you are trying to understand how all of this works, you are in good company. Martin Luther couldn't understand it either, as evident in his words here: *The mystery of Christ, that He sunk Himself into our flesh, is beyond all human understanding.*<sup>2</sup> Luther's lack of understanding the incarnation of God didn't keep him from experiencing it. And, it shouldn't keep us from experiencing it either. This life from beyond is not to be understood primarily, but to be experienced contextually.

The birth of Christ means that God is with us too. God is right here where we need Him the most. He is right here in the midst of our poverty. For some, this poverty is an

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.pietyhilldesign.com/gcq/quotepages/incarnation.html>

everyday reality, barely living on the scraps of the world and always on the search for sustenance. For others, it is the poverty of spirit, who are looking for spiritual sustenance. Some in this room and in this world today may know both or more kinds of poverty. And what you who are poor can know is that God is with you. Emmanuel, born in the dusty hay of a borrowed manger in a barn, is well-acquainted with your poverty. He is with us in our weaknesses and vulnerabilities. He is with us when we feel the sting of rejection. He is with us in our failures. He is with us in our successes. He is with us when we lose our jobs. He is with us when we look for new ones. He is with us in our insecurities. He stays with us when we are full of pride. He is with us when we celebrate. And He is with us when we suffer.

And He is with us in our need for help with our sin. He came into our sinful world, fully expecting to encounter and save sinners like you and me. And we do recognize today our sin and how it keeps us from being who God has really made us to be; how it is missing the mark God has drawn for our lives. What an incredible reality that God would come to us while we were deep in our sins to save us from them. What amazing love. Jesus was not only born among sinners, but he stayed with them until the day he died, loving them with his grace and patience and life all along the way.

“God with us” also reminds us of God’s desire and movement to get up close and personal with us. The birth of Christ would not only bring God into physical contact with the flesh He had made, but also provided the way for a spiritual union between God and humankind for eternity. “Up close and personal.” Now that’s a great way to think of God. And that’s one of the best ways to think of Jesus. Jesus is God’s way of getting up close and personal with you and me, providing reconciliation for a sacred union. And what this means is that we can receive and grow in the love that comes from such a union. Martin Laird, in his book *Into the Silent Land*, expresses it this way, *The more we realize we are one with God the more we become ourselves, just as we are, just as we were created to be. The Creator is outpouring love, the creation, the love outpoured.*<sup>3</sup> Are you in such a union? Are you allowing God to get this up close and personal with you?

“God with us.” What this means for us is what God intends for it to mean to the world. This powerful phrase and reality, though, can become our best kept secret. It can become something we discover and cherish so much that we neglect to share with the world around us. Or, it could become the kind of phrase that could be used against others. It has been and can still be said in such a way as to imply that God is with us and not with others. Or not with you. But what we are to know by this title of Jesus is that, through Him, God is with and for everyone. The tent he pitched in this world is big enough for everyone to fit under. His presence is for everyone to experience and know. Just as Mary delivered Emmanuel to the world, so we are to deliver him to our world today as well. God wants everyone to hear that He is with them. And He has called us to share this news with others today. It may happen with a friend who is hurting, with a

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<sup>3</sup> Laird, Martin. *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Practice of Christian Contemplation*, p. 308 in the Kindle e-version.

family member we see at Christmas who has had a bad year, with a child in the Lighthouse who can't seem to understand algebra, with an addict who still can't say no or with a neighbor who wonders why you get up and go to church on Sunday. People all around us are still looking for a sign that they are not alone.

This past week, Chuck Meehan and I rode together to Monroe for the VOA Christmas Service and Lunch held there for the Northeast Office. Chuck was driving and I was riding co-pilot. Once we arrived in Monroe, we were on a hunt to find the right street to turn onto to get to the VOA office. We kept getting hung at red lights and couldn't seem to get there. At each light, I would look ahead for the sign at the next intersection. Time was running out and we needed to make a decision about where to turn. I could see a sign up ahead but couldn't read it. It wasn't until we were right up on it that I could tell what it was. It ended up being the right one and it got us to where we needed to be. The sign was there, but I needed to see it up close. I thought about this sign while reflecting on this message for today.

What we have been hearing from God's word these last four weeks is that something great is up ahead and that there is a sign for us to see to get there. And it tells us where to turn in order to know we are not alone. Advent is a time and way for us to get up close and personal to this sign of God's amazing love. There are just a few days of it left before Christmas. The sign is there. Will you get close enough to see it?