

With Us Till the End

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[0 : 0 0] All right. Thank you, Lisa. Good morning to everybody. Hope you're doing well. My name is Elliot. I'm one of the pastors here at the One Harbor New Bern site, and it's so good to be with you here on the last day of 2023. Hopefully we'll take it out strong. And so today we're going to be concluding a series we've done throughout the Christmas season, throughout the Advent season.

Advent being a word that simply means the coming or the arrival. And so we've been celebrating the coming of the one who the world has longed and waited to see, Jesus. And we've really explored how, and we're going to look back on how that's really important across all of our lives, right?

Because as followers of Christ, certainly we look back to the one who has come, but we are looking forward to the one who's going to come again. And so throughout, you know, all of our lives are in some ways a little bit of this Advent season. In this particular year, we've been focusing on one particular aspect, which is this name Emmanuel, which means God with us. And so after the, over the last couple of weeks, we've looked at that in a lot of different contexts. We started in the Old Testament when, uh, during a period when God's people, like their back was against the wall and it didn't look like they, they knew if they were going to make it or not. And into that, God steps with this promise that he's going to be with them and that he starts to reveal that the way in which he's going to be with them is much bigger than anything they could have anticipated. Then we kind of flash forward to the traditional Christmas thing you think about, right? Where the Jesus is born and the manger and the angels and all that jazz, right? Um, but it's really this amazing moment where God comes to be with us like us in this mysterious way where he's fully God and he's fully man. He loves us up close. He steps into that. And then last week, Jesse kind of took us through, uh, part of God being with us is that Jesus knows what it's like to be with us, um, through the experiences we live in life. Like he knows what it is to live in exile. He knows what it is to live in obscurity. Like he's not unfamiliar with the things that are common to our lives. And across all of these messages, there's basically been this one resounding truth over and over that you've seen, which is Christmas is all about God wanting to be with us.

And that's really what we've been trying to get to is that it is so crucial for followers of Jesus to know that because what that means is the truth we seek, the truth we follow is not just some stale truth in a book. It is an interactive living truth. It is a person who has come to show us who God is and to draw close to us. And so today as we end this series and indeed again, another year in our lives, I think it's a good way to kind of land this plane to just step back and consider how scripture really from end to end is a story about a God who wants to be with us now and a God who wants to be us, be with us to the end, to the end of what? Well, really to the end of whatever you can think of, to the end of the season you're in, to the end of your days on this earth, to the end of all.

He wants to be with us. And in fact, in the gospel account we've been looking at in Matthew, it actually starts and ends with the presence of God. We started in Matthew again with kind of the Christmas story of God coming to be with us. But at the very end of Matthew, like the last verses in that book, you see this idea of God with us show back up. In Matthew chapter 28, we're going to be looking today. If you have your Bibles, you can turn there. If not, no worries.

[3 : 57] It's going to be on the screen behind me. The passage at the end of Matthew says this, And Jesus came and said to them, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

And behold, I am with you always to the very end of the age. Now, these are kind of famous verses that give this commission to take the gospel to the end of the earth. And we'll get back to that in just a second. But at the beginning, I actually want to focus on the very last line here where he says, And behold, I am with you always to the end of the age. At the very end of Matthew, you get two huge life-giving truths. Jesus is with you right now, always. Jesus will be with you to the end, to the end of the age. And I think it's worth asking, what, if we really believed that, what would that look like in your lives? I mean, if you really believe that God was with us, like with us right now until the end of the age, like what would that mean for our lives? And I think it would mean a lot of things. So first, if Jesus is with us right now,

I think it would have to mean that Jesus is with us in our darkest moments. It may seem a little bit of a heavy place to start, but if you've looked through all these narratives we've read in the Advent season, we see God with people in dark times. So both dark times, like large dark times, right? So we see him with Jesus going, you know, with his people going into captivity in Isaiah. We see it during the oppression of Rome. We see it in this story of Jesus fleeing and the murder of all these children. Like this is heavy stuff, right? And what that tells us is that Jesus is going to be with us through like the big world events, right? Like the things that shake us up. 9-11, economies crashing, COVID, like whatever shakes you up, God is with us during those heavies.

But we also see Jesus with people in their own personal darkest moments. Like over and over through the gospels, he's with his disciples, his friends, through hard times. And like what you see is that nothing's going to stop him, right? Like he does whatever is needed to be with him, right? Like he walks on water at one point, right? Like, hey, you can't get to him because, no, I can walk on water. I can do that.

[6 : 44] He walks through walls. He walks out of a tomb. Not even death is going to stop him from being with his people. And that's just really important to remember that like when we're feeling low, like he can't get to you, like whatever's going on is too heavy.

Jesus is just as passionate about the people in this room today as he was the people you read about in that story. And he's just as willing to come to you. One of the things that we often think about as the holidays is we know it's a season that's intended to be joy, but obviously for a lot of people it's the hardest time of the year, right? Like obviously if you know, it's really easy to feel loneliness and loss kind of magnified at this time of year, particularly when everything around you is saying be happy, but you can't feel that. And it's hard to know how to express that, particularly if you have kids and they're excited, but it's kind of a hard time for you. And we just understand, you know, particularly if you minister to anyone, you know, sometimes this is just a hard time to be with people.

It was like that for my family this year. So many of you that know me know that earlier in this year, my family lost my sister to a very unexpected stroke.

She was in her early 30s. So when this year started, she was here and she's not here now. And when that happens, obviously as you get close to the holidays, it just has a different tenor to it, particularly for my parents, right?

When you lose a child. And so it's not something that we've been looking forward to in the same way. And obviously that kind of carries into the season. And I know that's the case for many of you as well.

- [8 : 32] If that is you, like if this is a hard time, I think my encouragement would be and not in a trite way, like God knows that heavy and he feels it too. But I would submit to you that what we need is not just to get through the holidays just for it to be over.
- Like what we need is God with us in it when it's happening right now. Like we need him close to us in hard and sad places. And we can call out to him.
- Like you don't have to be afraid. The Bible says Jesus is a man who is acquainted with sorrows. He will not shy away with you because you don't feel like you've got it all together because you're sad right now.
- And so I would just encourage you if that's the place you're in, reach out to him. Like he, our sorrows don't repel him. They draw him all the more close. Ask him into that season if that's where you've been.
- But one of the beautiful things about Jesus is that if he's going to be with us always, that means he's not just with us in the hard moments. It means Jesus is also with us in the ordinary moments.
- [9 : 44] So, you know, beyond kind of the heavy of this Christmas season, I would say just in general this year was a bit of a grind, right? So like many of you, we kind of got on the sickness train and rode that around a few times, right?
- Like I was sick on Christmas and then we've gone through the cycles of this person's sick and that person's sick and you're either sick or you're taking care of someone. And we did some things.
- Undoubtedly, there's some memories that are made. We'll look back at a picture some year in the future and go, hey, that was really cute with our kids or whatever. But overall, I mean, honestly, it was just a bit of a kind of a forgettable Christmas, right?
- And so we went through all the rush of the holiday season and now it's like there's just a lot to clean up, right? Like you get to the end of it and there's like, hey, there's more laundry there and there's more dishes there and there's more sweeping and oh, I better pay the power bill and bam, time to go back to work, right?
- That's just kind of the grind that life is sometimes. And honestly, I think sometimes it's actually easier to remember God in the hard times because if you're desperate, you're just all the more likely to call out.
- [10 : 49] Like you know you're sinking, you know you need help, right? But the kind of the grind of the ordinary and the mundane can draw you away from God as much as the deep despair, right?
- And so I think it's really important to remember that Jesus wasn't just with people in the hard times, he was with them through the ordinary times, through meals, through family events, through life events and those things that we think are forgettable.
- Like it feels like what is the purpose of that? We were all just sick for a while and now back to chores. Part of looking in faith is believing that Jesus is there too, right?
- That he's doing something that shapes you, something that's born of his love with you even in those ordinary moments. And so I actually take a lot of comfort in the idea that when I feel like things are kind of routine that Jesus is there.
- So let's avoid that temptation to think that God is ever too busy with more important things or life is mundane right now so he's focused on somebody and not God is big enough to be with everybody always.
- [11 : 56] He's with us. But one of the things we also see in this verse in Matthew is God being with us is not just a when thing, it's also a where thing because it tells us pretty clearly Jesus is with you wherever you go even to the ends of the earth.

So that passage in Matthew is often called the Great Commission because Jesus is telling his followers, he's commissioning them as to what they're to do while he goes back to be with the Father and what he says is you are to literally go everywhere.

And he leaves no doubt as to why they can do it. I mean he says all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me which means you never have to live in fear of fulfilling that commission because there's no place you can go that Jesus is not going to go with you or maybe more appropriately that his spirit is not already there.

Psalms 139 the Old Testament psalmist teases this out and he says where shall I go from your spirit or where shall I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol like the grave the dark place you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea even there your hand should lead me and your right hand should hold me.

[13 : 23] If I say surely the darkness shall cover me and the light about me shall be night even the darkness is not dark to you the night is bright as day for darkness is as light with you.

Interesting before we move on just kind of a side note here it's interesting to me that the psalmist sees God's kind of eternal presence and his seeing over you not as something that's terrifying.

I mean if you think about like for most of us if we think about the idea of somebody watching me all the time that's probably not the most comforting thing. Right? I mean like all the time like everything you're doing.

You feel me? Right? Like everything you're doing you're probably like I don't know if any I would feel comfortable anybody knowing everything I'm doing all the time.

But the psalmist looks at it because he trusts the father's heart of I want you to be there. If I'm high if I'm low if I'm in a good place if I'm in a bad place I know that I'm never alone.

[14 : 24] I'm never facing this by myself and that is a comfort to him. It's a promise not just for whenever but for wherever. There's a theologian named Abraham Kuyper around the turn of the century had this very well known quote where he says there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ who is sovereign over all does not cry mine.

Now you can like look at his theology and like agree or disagree with how he worked that out in practice or life but he ain't wrong about that. Jesus claims all of his creation and so when we go out in the world to share him with people we don't have to feel like intruders.

I mean there are certainly ways that you can go out and like there's ways we can do that where we don't make an idol of like our own intentions or our own desires or our own kind of cultural proclivity for how to do stuff.

There's ways to be you know wise about that but when we go out we know that Jesus is already there and honestly I think one of the ways you keep yourself from kind of imposing your own will in that is just to think about it like this when you go into a situation you go in asking God where are you already at in this?

Like where are you already at work in people's lives? Instead of me deciding what I'm going to do why don't you help me see where you're already moving and working in people's lives and I'll join you there.

[16 : 03] This is Jesus' world and he promises that he's going to be with us in all of that like to the end of the earth. Right? But beyond all that he gives us this final promise that he's going to be with us and he says specifically Jesus is going to be with us to the end of the age.

Now followers of Jesus love to debate and I would say in their less noble moments fight mercilessly about how Jesus is going to kind of bring this age to an end.

Right? And like any weighty question there are ways to engage in that that are helpful and full of faith and there's ways to make it kind of an unhealthy obsession but if you look at kind of any orthodox view of what the Bible's talking about of the end of the age there are a couple themes that are clear in all of them.

So number one is Jesus is victorious meaning he is not worried about winning like all of the voices full of hot air that are declaring their dominion over this world will be silenced and Jesus will be victorious.

It tells us that there is a reckoning a judgment which again might offend our modern sensibilities a little bit but if you think about it that's actually to me again a comforting thing to know that God isn't just okay with bad things happening that means that God sees the bad that happens in the world and in your life and he cares and there is a reckoning and a judgment and then at the end of all that it tells us that Jesus is coming to take his people to be with him forever and even if you don't like for a lot of us I mean maybe that doesn't take up a lot of your thought right like what's gonna happen at the end of time at the end of the age when God comes back that might not pop into your day to day moving about life but the truth is a lot of scripture is actually focused on that very thought when that day comes how does a person have confidence like how would you be confident on that day thankfully part of that is just the simple assurance that Jesus gives us that he is going ahead of us that he wants his people to be with us in John chapter 14 verses 1 through 3 he gives us this great comfort he says let not your hearts be troubled believe in God believe also in me in my father's house there are many rooms and if it were not so would I have told you that I'm going to prepare a place for you and if I go to prepare a place for you

[18:51] I will come again and I will take you to myself that where I am you may be also Jesus is planning to be with his people like he told him that specifically because he was going away and he knew that would be a fear but he's like don't fear I'm going away specifically because I plan to be with you forever that's a comfort but it's probably not also the question if you think about if you do give some thought to this that haunts you I think the question that really starts to haunt you is how am I ever going to survive that judgment I mean the more you look at who Jesus is like who is this man you look at how he loves and how he serves and how he sacrifices and how he holds nothing back and you just come to realize that man that's not me certainly not all the time right and I mean how will I how can I really have any confidence that I'm going to be one of those people that he wants to be with because how can I be with God forever if my sin is going to be there to separate us like if I'm never going to measure up to that there's a movie made a couple of years ago about the life of Martin Luther called Luther funny enough and it like any movie it takes a little bit of artistic license but I think it does do a fairly good job of kind of depicting the arc of Martin Luther's life and like a lot of the reformers during that period you can kind of see early how he's just he's living a life where he's devoted himself to God but he is really tormented by his sins right like how he can never live up to

God how everything he does he's just acutely aware of how he falls short and what that does is it drives him to a place of he's angry both at God and himself and he kind of goes back and forth between this because you know I want to serve God but I also want to love him you know there's this one point where he's really just kind of tormented in prayer and one of the other priests at the place he's staying comes in and says Martin what is it that you seek and he says what I want is a God that I can actually love and one that can love me and he tells him something simple he says then draw close to Christ bind yourself to Christ and you'll understand God's love and what you kind of see as it unfolds is that he starts to realize that what that means is the thing that he thinks is separating him from God is made right by Christ like drawing near to Christ is drawing near to the

Father and it kind of culminates in this scene where he's preaching to a church and he's talking about how it's actually a pretty good gospel presentation for just a normal film kind of movie where he says you know I used to see God as just kind of delighting in punishing me for my sins right and just kind of looking down on me and just ever being ready and willing to pounce kind of dangling me over the fires of hell he's like when I saw God like that I realized it was really like I had drawn this storm cloud like a storm cloud had been drawn across his face because to look on God's heart is to look on his friendly heart and the way you know that is in Christ and he goes on to kind of outlay how you know you're not going to be made free like your your own heart Satan accusers are always still going to be in your ear telling you that because you did that this is what you are right because you sinned you are a sinner and you deserve death and hell and he says yep when that happens this is how you should respond you should say okay what of it

I know that I am a sinner and that I deserve death and hell but here's the thing I know one named Jesus Christ who has suffered and made satisfaction in my stead and wherever you see him seated from now until eternity there I will be also we'll always be I mean think about that like wherever Jesus is seated in glory you get to be there with him no power of hell no scheme of man will ever separate you from him not because you're good enough but because he was good enough and ultimately that's why we know God will and can always be with us because Jesus has made it so like that's the whole point of God coming to be with us Jesus has made it so whenever wherever forever nothing can ever separate you from the love of

Christ and that's the hope we stand in and that's the hope we go out of this year and into the next year with as the band comes up if you are here today and you are not a follower of Jesus I would simply say to you that he can be God with you you don't have to face this next year alone you don't have to face whatever is happening in your life alone he wants to be God with you he is not looking at you looking at your sins and repelled his heart is inflamed for you not because sin is good but because Jesus is a good savior Jesus sacrifice his blood is stronger than your failure you can be with him we're gonna as we go in this moment we're gonna have a prayer behind us on the screen that's one way you can express that to him but you can just call out to him and say Jesus save me that's what his name means we talked about the name

[24 : 59] Emmanuel meaning God with us the name Jesus means God saves his people Jesus save if you are a follower of Jesus I think our response to this is simply to live as a children of Emmanuel to live in light of that in Acts chapter 4 there's this scene where Peter and John are moving out in this commission that that God has given them that Jesus has given them and it says that people took notice of Peter and John but it says they didn't take notice of them because of their education or because of their knowledge or because of their special status it says they took notice that they had been with Jesus we live as children of Emmanuel by being close to him and then showing the world what that one we are close to looks like and so as we move out that's really what it is like live like God actually is with us and trust him in that today let's go ahead and stand together so this is a moment where we come to the communion table so we've got these tables set up kind of the four areas so when we come to the time you can go to the table and take those elements back to your seat and partake of them when you're ready but this is what it tells us to do it says before we do that we should examine our hearts and again this is not a merciless trying to search out every sin to make sure we're pure it's to simply come before the father and say

God is there anything I need to change my mind on anything I need to repent of anything that you need me that you want me to do different and just offer that to him and then to trust that he is the good savior that he said he would be that he will be faithful to forgive and then whatever the spirit reveals you move in that and then you simply go to the table and take the elements and as you partake you're just remembering that he gave his body and his blood for us and you could even ask him in this moment God help me to know that you are with me that you're close to me he likes to move in special ways like that in the ways we need it and so just take a moment and pray and when you're ready go to the table take it to your place and partake in joy and faith that whatever this next year is going to have in it Jesus is already there he's already going to meet you in whatever comes joy or sorrow father we offer this time to you you are our good lord thank you for this season the ending of one year and the beginning of another father go with us be with us always holy spirit come in this moment please testify to us in our hearts that we are treasured and loved and that you are with us not because we deserve it but because

Jesus is a great savior we ask that in Jesus name amen so