

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: Christmas Eve, December 24, 2020 Year B

Text: Luke 2:1-20

Title: God Is with Us

Focus: God fully entered into the human condition by becoming a vulnerable infant in Jesus, Emmanuel, born to ordinary people who were at risk within their society. This is a message of hope for us all—that God in Jesus is fully with us.

We're All in This Together?

“The COVID-19 Virus stinks.” In a sermon a week ago Sunday on Dec. 13, I followed the example from the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah was writing to a people who were experiencing disruption by being in exile. He as prophet was honest and spoke the truth about how things were—that circumstances were not what people would wish:

- People are brokenhearted (v. 1)
- They are stuck, feeling imprisoned, held captive (v. 2)
- They are mourning (vv. 2, 3)
- They are feeling faint or weak (v. 3)

Following that example, I spoke honestly that our circumstances are not as we would wish—primarily, that we have been living with COVID-19 pandemic health conditions and restrictions for around 9 months. And as the fall has turned to winter, we have seen COVID health numbers go from bad to worse, with the positivity, hospitalization, and death numbers rise and remain alarmingly high.

Again, following the honesty of the prophet, I summarized our circumstances by saying that “It stinks.” It stinks that COVID numbers continue at this alarmingly high level. It stinks that at a time when we most want to and need to meet in person, we also recognize that it is not wise to do so. It stinks that across the country, governors and public health officials and leaders in particular segments of society are having to devise operating plans with provisions that are like tightrope-walking to try to balance both public health concerns and economic stability. There seem to be only lose-lose choices. It stinks.

“We're All in This Together” sign: From as early as March of this year, when we slowly began to understand that this COVID-19 virus was not going to be geographically isolated, but become a widespread, significant health problem, we've become aware that a change in our behavior or how we respond affects the spread of the virus. At first, the message was “Flatten the Curve!” Public health officials delivered this message with two curves plotted on a graph—a tall, skinny curve—the bad one – showing what would happen if a lot of people were to get sick at once, in a short period of time, and overwhelming health care systems.

The other curve, flatter and lower, showing a preferable outcome if we were to work together to limit the spread of the virus.

And as time has gone on, we have seen public health messages designed to encourage healthy disciplines like frequent hand washing, use of hand sanitizer, and maintaining physical distance. Later, mask wearing was recognized as a significant step people could take in slowing the spread of the virus.

Here's a public health message you've undoubtedly seen and heard:



People have intended “We are all in this together” to be an encouraging, “hang in there” kind of message. I think the intent of the message is

- **to encourage people** to let them know that the frustration that they face affects us all.
- Another impact of the message is **to continue to educate people**—that the Coronavirus, as a widespread public health condition—by definition a *pandemic*, in terms of having a far-reaching, international impact, affects us all.¹
 - As a public health message, the phrase is also intended to inspire a change in behavior—to convey that an individual’s personal habits do impact other people in terms of providing opportunity for the spread of the virus or to limiting its spread.
 - The educational message is to recognize that we have an interconnected quality. What one person or group of people does affects others.
 - I think that **encouragement** and **education** are both ways in which the “We are all in this together” statement is true.

On the other hand, there is a sense in which ***we’re not all in this together***. To the degree that we are not affected in the same way, we are not “all in this together.” To the degree that consequences are an inconvenience for some and true hardship for others, “we are *not* all in this together” or at least we’re not all in this *together*.

There are both anecdotal as well as statistically verifiable examples of how different communities are affected by the virus. Work groups, economic classes, and racial ethnic minorities are impacted differently. Race and ethnicity are risk markers for other underlying conditions that affect health, including socioeconomic status, access to health care, and exposure to the virus related to one’s occupation.²

In data reported by the CDC at the end of November, compared to whites,

- Hospitalization rate for Native Americans, Blacks, and Hispanics is about 3.5 to 4 times greater.
- Death rates are about 2.5 times greater.
- **Are we really “All in this together?”**

¹ The word *pandemic* comes from Greek words *pan* = all and *demos* = people, common people within a village or state (as in democracy).

² COVID-19 Hospitalization and Death by race/ethnicity. Updated Nov. 30, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/investigations-discovery/hospitalization-death-by-race-ethnicity.html>

While the public health education goal of inspiring us all to more disciplined, thoughtful, healthy behaviors, for our sake and for the sake of others, is a valid goal, the challenging and provocative question to ask is “Are we claiming ‘We’re all in this together’ as a way of overlooking the uncomfortable reality that the current disparities of COVID reveal the socio-economic and racial inequities that have always existed in American society?”

Where Does God Fit in all of This?

Where does God fit in will all of this? Let’s talk about the big picture of what God was doing in the coming of Jesus: God could have chosen any way for God to intervene in human history. God chose to enter in from the most vulnerable position. God chose, as Luke describes (1:52), to identify with and lift up “the lowly.”

In the annunciation, in the appearance of the angel Gabriel to Mary, the angel declares that she is not alone:

- ²⁸“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”
- ³⁰“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.”
- God chose an unwed, poor girl from a small, seemingly insignificant town, to be God’s favored one.
- She and her betrothed, Joseph, were subject to the decrees of the government powers which occupied the land in which they lived.
- They were weary from travel to meet the demand of those decrees.
- Later they would face physical threat by Herod and would have to relocate to seek safety/asylum.

At the heart of the Christmas story is the promise that God chose to come in the small and vulnerable form of a baby born to poor and frightened parents.

And here’s how that makes a difference to us: We are in a time that “stinks” right now. While we have not all been affected in the same way or to the same degree, it is still true that we have experienced economic hardship, political strife, attempts to undermine the very foundation of our democracy, and developed a new and sharper awareness of longstanding racial injustice . . .

Particularly after the year we have had, may we recognize that God in Jesus, who is called Emmanuel, God with us, chose to fully enter into the human condition with all of its vulnerabilities.

At the heart of the carols and celebrations and prayers and readings of Christmas is the promise that God comes to us in love to tell us that we are loved and to send us out to love others always equipped by the life-giving power of God’s love. We are, in fact, both favored and accompanied by God. The angel’s promise to Mary, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you” (Luke 1:28). . . . this promise first heard by Mary is true for us all. It is true in Jesus, Emmanuel, who is God with us. By God’s gracious choice in Jesus, God is together with us. Thanks be to God.