
You Are Not Alone!

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
Christmas Eve – Year B**

*O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!*

Merry Christmas from the Cathedral of St. Philip, in Atlanta, to you, wherever you are, in this 2020 year!

Wherever you are. Maybe, like the ancient hymn chants in *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*, you've been in lonely exile. Maybe you're in a cold and empty winter.

In his delightful fantasy book, *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*, the author C.S. Lewis describes a kingdom called Narnia. When Narnia was still under a curse, C.S. Lewis described it as a place where it was "Always winter, but never Christmas." Always winter, but never Christmas. This pandemic loneliness has been like a cold winter for many of us, waiting for a Christmas that just won't come.

But today, tonight, wherever we are in this cold winter, Christmas will come. Emmanu-El. That name means "God with us." When God is with us, Christmas is here. "Emmanuel." We are not alone.

Maybe you've been in despair, fatigue, suffering, even death. Maybe you are in better places, in community, with family, or in love.

Wherever you are, I have one message for you this Christmas. That message is this: You are not alone! Emmanuel. Christmas is one of the only times we call God, "Emmanuel."

And we call God so many different names, these days! Sometimes it's been downright embarrassing what we have called God in the past nine months. Hey, in the past nine months, it's embarrassing what we have been calling each other! What we have been calling our household members, our community members, our extended family, our fellow citizens.

It's time to call God "Emmanuel" this time of year. And it's time to call each other, "Emmanuel." I do not know what will be happening on the actual December 24 of this year, 2020, the Year of the Pandemic. (As you certainly realize, I am recording this sermon before Christmas Eve, actually almost two weeks before Christmas Eve!)

It's been hard to remember what day it is, this year. But, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter when Christmas is, this year. The message is the same: You are not alone! You do not live by yourself!

I know it's felt like it. Maybe you felt like it when you saw all sorts of people gathering together in the streets this year. The liberals, the conservatives, the police. On our side, not on our side. What side are we on? Who is with us? Some of those people we saw on television on this year, we thought were on the other side. But God was with them, too. God was with us, through them.

Some of those people you saw this year were on computer screens, appearing as little squares in a video conference, in some meeting or whatever. Well, God is with them, too. And maybe you thought: Those people don't care about me. Aren't I more than a little box on a computer screen?

Yes, God is with you! The holy feast of Christmas says this one thing: God is with you. God is with us. You are not alone! It's the most important thing to say this Christmas. You are not alone.

The angel Gabriel appeared to the Woman Mary and announced, "Greetings, Favored One, The Lord is with you!" From that point on, Mary was not alone. And Mary sang, "*Let it be, Let it be* to me according to your word." Something small, but powerful, began to grow in Mary; she was not alone.

You are not alone either! There is something growing inside you, too!

Scientists tell us that, at any given moment, thousands of things are growing inside us. Lots of those things are good. Over five hundred species of bacteria live inside us, and most of the bacteria are actually good. We don't see them, but they are good!

But, as we have realized so sadly this past year, many of the things growing inside us are not so good. There are also viruses, germs, bad bacteria, even pathogens and toxic agents that would kill us if they were left to grow uncontrolled. Even the healthiest human body always contains thousands of viruses and germs that are not so healthy. This is a fact of life.

What keeps the human body healthy is that we give good energy to the good elements. We feed the good bacteria and good cells. We pay attention to those unseen elements that are positive and life-giving. Great family therapists, like the late Edwin Friedman, tell us the same thing about families and social systems. At any given moment, every social structure or family system contains elements that are destructive. But the healthy social systems distinguish health and wellness from the ill and the hopeless. They give their energy to hope and to healthy life.

This same principle was illustrated in a story told long ago by the Cherokee people, who once inhabited this very land around us, here in Atlanta. In their parable, an old Cherokee grandfather is teaching his grandson about life.

"A fight is going on inside me," he says to the boy. "It is a terrible fight, between two wolves. One wolf is evil; he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego." But then, the grandfather continues, "The other wolf is good; he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. This same fight is going on inside you - and inside every other person, too."

The grandson thinks about it for a minute and then asks his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?" The old Cherokee replies simply, "The one I feed."

Yes, right now, in our own time, many things are growing inside us. Some of us have the germ of fear growing inside us. Some of us have the germ of anxiety growing inside us. Those germs of fear and anxiety have a lot to feed on during this time of year.

Fear and anxiety can grow. And, like diseases, they can actually infect other people around you. Even unseen, these germs can grow.

Christians believe in things seen and unseen, and we believe they can grow. But, at Christmas, we gather to feed the positive growth. We gather to grow life and love in the world.

Like Mary, we are not alone. Like Mary, we hear the angel say, "Do not fear." The story of Mary is not a story just for women. It is the story of how each of us is invited to allow something to grow inside us. That something is the living Christ.

There is something—Someone!—growing in you. Maybe Christ has been growing inside you for these past nine months.

Maybe Christ, for you, is the seed of some new creation in your life, some new project or discipline. Maybe Christ is the growing egg of a new event, a new blossom, some idea that you've had for a while, that needs to be nurtured now.

Maybe, now—Today! Christmas!—Christ is ready to be born from you to the world. Maybe tonight, today, is a new way that God offers you to engage the world. Maybe God is creating in you a fresh way of being incarnate, a fresh way of being alive. Christmas can be any day of the year!

Yes, we still have germs and viruses and pathogens. But we also have something else. We have the presence of a more powerful agent, the agent of life and hope, the living Christ. There are lots of things that can grow inside us: but the living Christ can also grow. The living Christ can also spread. The living Christ can also be contagious!

Let it Be, Let it Be. Let it be, in us. Let it grow, in us. Let the living Christ thrive in us according to the angel's word.

You are not alone! There is a spirit of hope inside you! There is a spirit of life in you. There is joy, somewhere inside the mystery of who you are.

That hope, joy, love – all that is God! All this is God inside you waiting to be born, waiting to be made alive to the world. Christmas is a day to feed, to nourish, that hope and life and joy being born in you!

You are not alone! God is with you, and in you, beneath you, above you, around you.

*Christ beneath me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me*

That is what Christmas is all about. Christ is with you. God is with you. God is with us. Emmanuel.

C.S. Lewis wrote a series of seven books called *The Chronicles of Narnia*. *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* was only one of first books. The last, and seventh book, is called *The Last Battle*. In that last book, the young heroes end up at a stable. A stable. They are scared. They don't know whether they want to go inside or not. But when they do enter, they miraculously see, and find, a completely new world inside the stable!

Lewis writes that: *there was a blue sky overhead, and grassy country as far as they could see in every direction [all inside the stable!]. "It seems," said one of them, "that the stable seen from within, and the stable seen from without, are two different places." "Yes," said another, "its inside is bigger than its outside." Then, Queen Lucy said, "in our world, too, a stable once had something inside it that was bigger than our whole world."* (*The Last Battle*, pages 102-103).

Wow, they enter a stable and discover that "its inside is bigger than its outside." We enter our stables, tonight, too. There, we discover that we are not alone. There is something inside us, inside our bodies, that is bigger than what is outside. It's not fear or anxiety. It's not the virus or other illnesses, that is bigger than us.

It is Jesus, the Living Christ. The Christ who has been growing in us, and who wants to be born in us today. And who is bigger than any of us, truly big enough to give light and life to the whole world.

*A stable lamp is lighted
Whose glow shall wake the sky;
The stars shall bend their voices,
And every stone shall cry.*

*And every stone shall cry,
And straw like gold shall shine,
A barn shall harbor heaven,
A stall become a shrine.* (Richard Wilbur, Hymn 104)

You are not alone today. You are the stable in whom is born the Christ, the Light of the world. Merry Christmas!

AMEN.

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