

## Advent 3C – December 2021

One of the high-water marks of 20th century culture, an event that I revisit every year, is the 1965 television special *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. The fact that it continues to air fifty years after its premiere lets me know that I'm not alone in this assessment.

I think there must be something wrong with me, Linus. Christmas is coming but I'm not happy. I don't feel the way I'm supposed to feel. I just don't understand Christmas, I guess. I like getting presents and sending Christmas cards and decorating trees and all that, but I'm still not happy. I always end up feeling depressed.

If recent research is any indication, Charlie Brown is not alone. Articles and case studies on the correlation between the holidays and depression abound. Among the culprits advanced by psychologists are unrealistic expectations for the season, combined with excessive self-reflection that tends to focus on our disappointments. Others might struggle with deep-seated feelings of grief due to the loss of loved ones, or regrets brought on by estrangement from family members. (BY Todd Edmondson)

**O come, O come Emmanuel!** That is a familiar song and a familiar prayer during this season, and we love that name for Christ: Emmanuel! God with us! How the world waited for that Bethlehem birth, that child who would be Jesus, our Emmanuel!

Yet there is a startling idea in our scripture lessons this morning. It comes in Zephaniah, in our psalmody, and even in Philippians, but let's use the words in Zephaniah to summarize it: "The Lord your God," he writes, "is in your midst." The Lord is in your midst. It is a simple phrase, and one that appears dozens of times in the Bible. Why did the ancient writers find it to be so important?

In the first place, it was an unusual idea about God. Most ancient religions saw gods as being distant and far away. They could not be approached. And there is certainly something of that idea in some parts of the Old Testament. God is so powerful, so holy, that one cannot even look upon him or speak his name.

And yet there is always this other side to it. The Lord is in your midst. By this we understand that God is right here among us—not confined to a temple or a church, not far off and distant from us, but right here, right in our midst.

### **The hiddenness of God**

Now to me it is a bit puzzling that the Old Testament prophets, who were pointing to the coming of Messiah, could still say, in the present tense, "The Lord is in your midst." How can that be? How is it that they could look for the coming of God in the future, and yet still affirm that, in the very present moment, God is already here?

I suspect it has something to do with one of the great mysteries of our faith: the hiddenness of God. Sometimes it seems that God is nowhere to be found, he is hidden. And yet, even then, he is in our midst. Even when we seem to be in darkness, even when tragedy strikes, even when it seems that God has forsaken us, he is in our midst. And this suggests, you see, that at Bethlehem what is happening is not so much that God is coming among us, as if he were somehow before that time far away; no, at Bethlehem, he was revealing himself to us. He was letting us know that he was here among us.

And isn't that still so often the way he operates? He is among us, in our midst, every moment—but there are times when he reveals himself in a vivid way. Brother Lawrence, the seventeenth century mystic, talked about "practicing the presence of God." By this he meant that God is always in our midst, but much of the time we are not aware of him. We become so busy with life, so busy with chores and tasks and things to do, that we do not realize he is here. Brother Lawrence made an attempt to be aware of God's presence at every moment—in church, to be sure, but also in the kitchen, doing his chores. To pray, he once said, is not to come into God's presence, but to become aware of God's presence—a presence that is always there, each moment.

"My dad is here!"

(by Richard O. Johnson)

### Time to Act

Once the eminent philosopher John Dewey found his son in the bathroom. The floor was flooded and he was mopping furiously trying to contain the water in that room, keeping the damage to a minimum. The professor began thinking, trying to understand the deeper ramifications of the situation. After a few moments, the son said, "Dad, this is not the time to philosophize. It is time to mop!" Baptism is our statement that we are ready to stop philosophizing and ready to start mopping.

Zig Ziglar reminds us that the largest locomotive in the world can be held in its tracks while standing still simply by placing a single one-inch block of wood in front of each of the eight drive wheels. The same locomotive moving at 100 miles per hour can crash through a wall of steel reinforced concrete five feet thick, but it must be moving first. (by King Duncan from *Collected Sermons*, [www.sermons.com](http://www.sermons.com))