

Pastor Roy's sermon from December 18, 2016 (4th Sunday of Advent)

Isaiah proclaims in a time of deep political, economic, and religious uncertainty: God is with us. He also proclaims that something is about to happen that will change the world. Or "Something is happening that is changing the world."

Many may miss his sign, the powerful presence of God with us. But God is with us: for those with eyes to see and ears to hear, and tongues to rejoice. And for those who do not see it or touch it. Isaiah proclaims the reality so that more may begin to search for God with us. God with us all, but how much the more joyous if this God presence can be embraced fully. How much more joyous if all can participate in God with us rather than working against, God with us.

Joseph also learns the lesson of God with us. Consider his story this way. One day he is living his life, preparing for marriage, anticipating a family, and the next he is betrayed by the young woman he had come to trust and in whom he was investing his future. Now what? His life unravels. How could this happen? Joseph's world turns upside-down.

Now, I'm guessing Joseph was not thinking much of "God with us" during his engagement. Everything was fine. But clearly, with the news of Mary's expectation, everything is not ok. Meanwhile, thoughts of "God with us" are probably still far from him. He needs a message, he needs to be shown "God with us."

Then, suddenly, there is a dream. An angel. The basic message was this: Joseph, forget what you *were* thinking and planning. That was the old plan. I'm inviting you to go in a new direction--the direction of "God with us." You see, Joseph, when you start looking for God, everything starts to look differently. So you will need to make some difficult choices. You are going to go against flow of society.

Don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife. And after the baby is born, name him as if you were the father. "God with us" means that you will now act as father for this child. Name him Jesus, savior. Indeed, this child will be "God with us." This child will be a sign much like the one proclaimed by Isaiah. Emmanuel, God with us.

Yes, for Joseph "God with us" is indeed a new, challenging direction. Joseph, as you take Mary, you are seeking God with us. When you name the savior baby Jesus, you are seeking God with us.

Doesn't that put a new spin on God with us? Joseph and Mary leaning into God with us with tough choices. God with us was never a convenience for them. It was never a happy feeling of security. Their tough choices brought them into union with God. God with us for Mary and Joseph was not about their benefit. It was very much about living into the reality of God's merciful peace. It was them living in the realm of God. Their own benefit had nothing to do with it. They were submitting to God. To the wisdom, mercy, love, and justice of God.

We are tempted to think of God with us as a special perk, a nice feeling this time of the year that God loves us and is with us—that we are not alone. But that is only half of the story of God with us. It's a beautiful, amazing half. But the full experience is found in the other half. The Mary and Joseph half.

We too must embrace the difficult decisions and choose to live the reality of God with us. Am I willing to except the inconvenience of God with us.

As with Mary and Joseph, God with us is more about our neighbor, our community, our nation, and our world than about me.

God with us is clearly not about my own personal blessing or preferences. "God with us" might be a matter of going in a new direction, of heading straight into some pretty uncomfortable stuff.

But the good news about the promise of "God with us" and living into that promise, is that it is true. The more we practice "God with us," the more joy we will know. The more we will be in union with God. There are no short cuts. You all know this. You all live this.

But as we head into this final week before Christmas, my challenge to you is to do the hard work of Advent. To find Christ's presence in "God with us." To go ahead and choose God with us for all who stand before you. Regardless of what they look like, regardless of what version of God they worship, regardless of whom they voted for, regardless of what they say and do.

He has told you, what is good; and what *does* the lord require of you? But to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

God is with us. Amen.