

A Ministry of Accompaniment

Matthew 28:16-20; I Thessalonians 3:9-13

Sermon Notes from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
First Sunday of Advent, December 2, 2018
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As December skies lower and night falls heavier and sooner, my thoughts turn to Mary and Joseph making their way through their own darkness to Bethlehem. Did Mary ride the donkey the whole way? And Joseph: Was he encouraged, confounded, scared to death, or all three at once? Did Mary and Joseph chat on the journey, talk about politics, the weather, eschatology? They both, certainly, had much to ponder.

And I wonder this—as they pondered what the Spirit gave them to ponder, and as they walked the road their calling gave them to walk—did they feel lonely and sore alone? So many people feel alone this time of year.

Did they?

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As our Pakistan travel group flew above the clouds to Doha, Qatar, Sara Miles lectured at the Arts Club in Chicago. She said the that the most important word of all of scripture is . . .

Wait a second.

Isn't it pretentious even to suggest that scripture—all of scripture, the dizzying depth and height of it—that all of scripture even *has* a single most important word? And what is that word? What could that word possibly be? Is it "love"? Is it "Jesus"? Is it "justice"? Is it "mercy"? Is it "grace"? Is it "tithing"?

Sara Miles suggests that the most important word in all of scripture is the word "with." God has always been with God's people. Through every single darkness, and every rocky road, God is with us.

Sara Miles says these are "dark, frightening, uncertain times." Hum. I'm pretty certain back "in the good old days" Mary and Joseph thought the same thing. Wolves. Robbers. Roman occupation of their fertile land. Ruthlessness. Injustices galore. Uncertain times, indeed. Now and then.

But God is with us. We aren't in this alone. *God is with us.*

Sara Miles says within blocks of one another she knows a billionaire and a homeless woman. He lives in a multi-million dollar home. His wife has a \$400,000 purse. The homeless woman prostitutes her body for \$20 and donates her blood for \$10. How she knows these two, she didn't say. Perhaps they both volunteer at the feeding ministry that Sara Miles works at in San Francisco. These are hard times, indeed.

But flowing like a fountain is this reality: God is with us. "No matter what," Sara Miles says, "God just sticks with us."

And God has given us *us*. Each other. Together we get to walk with each other. We give money for shared causes. We stand with each other in the church—never satisfied with simplistic answers, always willing to push each other and learn from each other intellectually. We hand out white roses to neighbors locked indoors in tired, sagging neighborhoods. We sit with one another in worship. On trains. At board meetings. We sit in silence with each other as we weather the latest grief. We are as diverse as the flowers in a wild garden, but we stand in solidarity as a family of disparate saints. We kneel and pray at night. We welcome all-comers. We tend and bless the tie that binds.

Paul was so grateful for the people he knew and loved in the church at Thessalonica. He wrote these words,

⁹How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?

Eugene Peterson puts it this way:

⁹⁻¹⁰ What would be an adequate thanksgiving to offer God for all the joy we experience before him because of you? We do what we can, praying away, night and day, asking for the bonus of seeing your faces again and doing what we can to help when your faith falters.

God is with us. And God gave us *us*. Sara Miles calls this a “theology of accompaniment.”

“The whole point of a life being in relationship with God,” she said, “is being in relationship with others.” *Emmanuel*: God is with us. And we, by God’s grace, can stand with each other.

Like Mary and Joseph.

Mary and Joseph made their way through a dangerous passage. They had every reason to abandon the journey. God, certainly, would have understood if either or both said, “No. No thank-you. No way.” But they followed this wild call. Together.

*How silently how silently, the wondrous gift is given.
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin—
where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in.*

As Mary and Joseph trudged to Bethlehem, was the “dear Christ” slowly entering in?

After his resurrection and before he ascended to heaven, in the last passage of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus encourages his disciples with these amazing words. I can imagine the disciples receiving them with a certain measure of perplexity, and most certainly through glad tears: “Remember,” Jesus said to those he loved. “I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Affirmation of Faith

(from the Confession of 1967)

In Jesus of Nazareth, true humanity was realized once for all. Jesus, a Palestinian Jew, lived among his own people and shared their needs, temptations, joys, and sorrows. He expressed the love of God in word and deed and became a brother to all kinds of sinful people. But his complete obedience led him into conflict with his people. His life and teaching judged their goodness, religious aspirations, and national hopes. Many rejected him and demanded his death. In giving himself freely for them, he took upon himself the judgment under which all people stand convicted. God raised him from the dead, vindicating him as Messiah and Lord. The victim of sin became victor, and won the victory over sin and death for all people.

God's reconciling act in Jesus Christ is a mystery which the Scriptures describe in various ways. It is called

the sacrifice of a lamb,
a shepherd's life given for his sheep,
atonement by a priest;

again it is

ransom of a slave,
payment of debt,
vicarious satisfaction of a legal penalty, and
victory over the powers of evil.

These are expressions of a truth which remains beyond the reach of all theory in the depths of God's love for man. They reveal the gravity, cost, and sure achievement of God's reconciling work.

The risen Christ is the Savior for all people. Those joined to him by faith are set right with God and commissioned to serve as his reconciling community. Christ is head of this community, the church, which began with the apostles and continues through all generations.

Scripture Gospel Matthew 28:16-20

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am **with** you always, to the end of the age."

Scripture Epistle **1 Thessalonians 3:9-13**

⁹ How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? ¹⁰ Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. ¹² And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. ¹³ And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus **with** all his saints.