

Getting to Know Jesus, the Christ

Dec 28, 2014

The Emmanuel Energy – God with Us

Psalm 148 & Matthew 1:22-23

(144, 145, 151, 154)

What a strange way of being God!

Have you ever thought about Christianity that way?
Has this past year of getting to know Jesus, the Christ, better
ever confronted you with the oddness of this God's way
of being present, exercising power, and redeeming the world?

It certainly has for me.

In many ways, it has reinforced an old instinct in me.

It is the instinct to let God be God.

I first saw that phrase on the cover of a book
that I studied in my second or third year at university.

It was a course on Reformation history, taught by James Estes,
at the University of Toronto in the late 1960s.

The book, on Martin Luther's theology,
was written by Philip Watson and entitled *Let God be God*.

It should not be surprising for someone steeped and marinated
in the Reformed tradition that shapes Presbyterianism
to have this instinct to respect the right of God
to be God in the ways that God sees fit.

After all, this the creator, the sustainer, and the redeemer
of the whole of creation,
the lord over all that is.

That respect for what the theologians of our Presbyterian tradition call
the sovereignty of God is at the core of the witness and work of the church.

God's rule and reign, God's lordship,
lies at the centre of our faith.

What God desires should matter most to us,
because in that desire we find our own desires
most fully satisfied.

That's just how we're made – to find flourishing in this God.

This is the God who took flesh and dwelt among us,
as one of us,
in Jesus of Nazareth,
whose birth we have just celebrated.

That's the first strange thing.
God taking human flesh, formed in the womb of a young woman,
born in a barn, taken by his parents into exile as a refugee,
growing up in a tradesman's home as part of a proud people
oppressed by a foreign power in their own homeland,
finding around the age of 30 a dangerous calling –
the public proclamation of the kingdom of God –
that eventually got him killed
through a collusion by the powers he was threatening.

Then came the second strange thing.
This Jesus of Nazareth,
whom many of his followers were beginning to think
was the long-promised Messiah or Christ or Anointed One
that God's chosen people had been awaiting,
this Jesus of Nazareth
rose from the dead, appeared to a lot of his followers,
passed on to them his mission of bringing heaven to earth,
and then ascended into heaven,
leaving his Holy Spirit to oversee the operation.

Now comes the third strange thing.
This God who came into our history in Jesus,
and remains active among us in the Holy Spirit,
actually makes us active parts of Christ's body
in order to bring to full fruition
the new age promised in the Jewish prophets,
an age of justice, peace, and hospitality.
We become part of Jesus, the Christ,
actual members of his body as it continues its work on earth,
primarily through the mission of the church.
God has, in a very real sense, made us divine,
incorporated us into and filled us with the divine energy,
the Emmanuel energy,
the energy of God with us, and in us, flowing through us, and for us.

So, let's see if we can summarize these three strange things
about God that we find revealed to us in Jesus, the Christ.

First, the creator and lord of the world takes human flesh
and dwells among us as God's blessing to us.

Second, this human God undergoes every indignity, even death,
yet is not defeated in his desire to be in loving relationship
with the whole of his creation.

What God did in Jesus, the Christ, was to initiate
the new age envisioned by John in Revelation:

*... the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.*

Third, God has drawn us into his being
by the power and persuasion of love, and love alone,
into his energy so that we can participate fully
in the coming of this new age of God's loving reign over all the earth.

When you look at the stories people in today's world
are trying to get us to tell ourselves
about who we are, and what we should be doing,
and the rewards we will get if we do what they want,
this is a strange alternative story.

It's not a story about consuming, or controlling, or dominating,
about impressing, or alluring, or winning at all costs.

It's a story about love,
about justice, peace, and hospitality.

Being part of the energy of this God who is with us
in the most intimate ways imaginable then beyond that,
is the Christian story, the Christian narrative,
the Christian way of being in and for the world.

Christians will show up differently in this world.
They will challenge many of its current values and viewpoints.
They will be seen as strange.

But in that strangeness is the hope of the world.
It is the strangeness of God's love.
It is the strangeness of God's vision.
It is the strangeness of being an active part of the energy of God.
It is the strangeness of bringing heaven to earth.

Throughout 2015, we will be exploring together
how this strange God, seen most clearly in Jesus Christ,
and still persuasively active among us through the Holy Spirit,
affected the most influential of early Christians, the Apostle Paul.
I've entitled this series of texts, sermons, and learning opportunities
'Being the Church in Christ: The Wisdom of Pastor Paul.'

We'll look at who Paul was and what he said
as he prayed over and wrote to churches he had planted
throughout the known world in his time.
The question that will provoke us,
or call us forth, is this:

*How did Paul understand his mission with and for these early churches,
surrounded as they were by indifference and hostility?*

In the wisdom Paul found in the work of the Spirit
within him and among his brothers and sisters in Christ,
I'm convinced that we will find wisdom for our day
here at Brentwood Presbyterian, in North Burnaby, BC.
It will be wisdom that helps us make even more sense
of the strangeness of God.

It will be wisdom that strengthens us in our conviction
that this God's love is the triumphant power in the world,
in spite of all that seems to challenge it.

It will be wisdom that shapes our loyalty to and living of
the true story of God's redemption of the world in Jesus, the Christ.

I'm convinced that we will enjoy this exploration together.
I hope you will invite friends to enjoy it with us.
And I know deep in my soul that God's Emmanuel Energy,
the energy of God with us,
will accompany us throughout this coming year.

*Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far
more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, forever and ever. Amen (Eph 3:20-21)*