

EMMANUEL, our **JOY**: God is **AHEAD** of us (3rd in a Series of 4, ADVENT: a Season of Prepositions)

Luke 1:46-55

Saint Marks United Methodist Church, 3rd Sunday of Advent [December 15] 2013

1:46 And Mary said, I'm bursting with God-news;  
I'm dancing the song of my Savior God.  
God took one good look at me, and look what happened —  
I'm the most fortunate woman on earth!  
What God has done for me will never be forgotten,  
the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others.  
His mercy flows in wave after wave on those who are in awe before him.  
He bared his arm and showed his strength, scattered the bluffing braggarts.  
He knocked tyrants off their high horses, pulled victims out of the mud.  
The starving poor sat down to a banquet; the callous rich were left out in the cold.  
He embraced his chosen child, Israel; he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high.  
It's exactly what he promised, beginning with Abraham and right up to now.

This is the third Sunday in our Advent series. The first week we looked at the basic translation of Emmanuel: God is with us. Not only the prophecy given, but the last words of Jesus: “Lo, I am WITH you always....” But like radio waves, always present but not always evident, we need to have the right receiver to realize this blessing. What a **HOPE** to sustain us.

Last week, we moved beyond God's Presence WITH us, but also to the fantastic assurance that God is FOR us, even though a lot of preaching and teaching has mistakenly (even if for good intentions) taught folks that they must do something in order to gain God's favor. We were born in God's image, and God is for us; God loves us; nothing can separate us from the Love of God in Christ Jesus. Nothing. Period. God is for us. What **PEACE** that can bring us, to know that our worth is not based on anyone else's opinion. AND what **HOPE** we can share when we quit trying to compare ourselves to others, and release ourselves from the negative, judgmental, critical thinking that plagues most Americans every three minutes of their thought.

And for some folks these words came as a great change of thinking. Some folks here needed to chew on these ideas. Can it be? Can it really be true?

Well, today's lesson helps to explain some of this consternation. You see, God is not only WITH us in Jesus; God is not only FOR us in Jesus. But God is also ALWAYS AHEAD OF US, in Jesus. Emmanuel – **PEACE** – God is ahead of us.

Mary's song, recorded in Luke, is just one example of how God is moving ahead.

Now about Mary's time, it was well accepted belief that if God favored you then you were rich. (It was an idea not unknown 1700-1900 years later – it was called **“The Protestant Work Ethic.”** ) In Mary's song of revelation, she speaks God's new word – where God

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scattered the bluffing braggarts.  
He knocked tyrants off their high horses,  
pulled victims out of the mud.  
The starving poor sat down to a banquet;  
the callous rich were left out in the cold.

In the translation you are more familiar with, it says that “the rich will be sent empty away.”

New words. New concepts. God is out there ahead of the common sense of the day.

Please, please, please, do not quote to me from Hebrews 13:8:

**Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.**

I don't doubt that God and Jesus and their partner, the Holy Spirit, don't ever change. It's just that we weak-minded, developmental humans, aren't able to eat steak before we get off the baby formula. God has forever been breaking us in a bit at a time. And is **ALWAYS AHEAD OF US**, leading us onward, upward, and correcting our silly mistakes.

**Where do I get such ideas? From the Bible.** Look at this:

Back in the day of the First Testament, where life was hard and rules were few and far, if somebody did something wrong to you, you got 'em back; taught 'em a lesson. And then the Word of the Lord was given in commandment:

**An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.** (Leviticus 24:20)

Whoa! That was pretty radical stuff back then. Because, whenever you 'got' somebody back, you always had to up the ante. Revenge always escalates the score.

So the Word of the Lord came down as a moderating force. **Hey folks, justice doesn't mean hitting them harder; it means to even the score. So an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Nothing extra for your trouble.** Hmmm. Rod's Sunday School lesson occasionally taught, "Fun with Leviticus" might actually have something.

OK, so God passed down a new teaching. Jump forward about 1500 years, to the time of Jesus. There people are relying on "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth" to exact judgment, with no cause for mercy, leaving a lot of business for dentists and ophthalmologists (which weren't very plentiful). And Jesus said, **Hold on. Hold up. Let's do something different. Turn the other cheek. Don't get even; love your enemy.** (Matthew 5:38-45)

He was ahead of them. Teaching something new; something better.

Sometimes, even today -- 2,000 years later -- people still aren't willing to get caught up to speed.

The examples are plentiful throughout the Bible, where God shows a baby step, to get people on board. Then, later on, it gets changed because God thinks they are able to move on, to move up, to improve, to include more folks in the action.

Sometimes, we don't have the slightest problem making that move:

- Anyone here eat bacon? Bad – **Leviticus 11:7**, and if we go one more verse, we can't play football either: made out of pigskin.
- Anyone here eat their steak other than well done? God will not look upon you and will cut you off. – **Leviticus 17:10**
- No polyester or lycra/spandex or cotton blend fabrics – **Leviticus 19:19**
- No tattoos or shaving off your beard – both in **Leviticus 19:27-28**

OK, so, we don't follow those anymore. What's the big deal?

Well, the big deal is that **whenever Jesus GOES ON AHEAD of us**, and **introduces a new program upgrade** for **something liberating**, for something **opening up the Kingdom for more folks**, GUESS WHO IT IS that keeps saying: **"No! No! You can't do that!"** I'll give you a clue: the people who keep getting insulted by Jesus going on ahead of us are the same people who didn't like how he did it during

his 33 years on earth, and they made sure that He was put to death:

### **THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS.**

Jesus is still moving AHEAD of us today. And some religious leaders still keep wanting to go back to the good ol' days.

It should be a THING OF JOY. But, alas, too often, it is the religious folks who can't accept that, and want to make people **slaves of the old way**. **Usually, the NEW WAY that Jesus is going that is opposed by the RELIGIOUS FOLKS is a way that opens the door to somebody different, causes the religious folks to lose power.**

But Jesus keeps on keeping on, and MOVING AHEAD. Because like his failure to bow down to the religious leaders of His day, He's not so much impressed by their moralistic rants today either. Remember: He is EMMANUEL: God **with** us, **for** us, and **ahead** of us.

Do you remember the example we looked at last week? Jesus' disciples were upset because someone was healing folks, but not claiming membership in the "Jesus Club." They wanted to do something, oh, like **rain fire down from heaven on them** – the **1<sup>st</sup> century equivalent of a nuclear bomb**. Even these folks who were on the cutting edge with Jesus wanted to keep it in THEIR power, THEIR control.

And Jesus said, **Shut up! If they're not against us, they're for us**. Even then, He was **WAY OUT AHEAD OF THEM**—**caring about healing and loving, and not dividing people into groups**.

**Nothing will separate us from the Love of God in Christ Jesus. [ask congregation to repeat that, please]** For **this** child of God or for **that** child of God. All **beloved children** of His, and **precious and beautiful to behold** in Jesus' sight.

And for each one of those children of God, they can **joyfully, joyfully** sing along with Mary:

**I'm bursting with God-news; I'm dancing the song of my Savior God.**

**Just one more thing** I need to share with you about Emmanuel – Jesus – the God who goes AHEAD of us.

I hesitate to move out of the season, and quote Easter scripture. But it is part of the EMMANUEL good news.

After Jesus had risen from the tomb, the angel of the Lord told the women who had come to the tomb to tend Jesus, that not only was He raised from the dead, but that they should give instruction to Jesus' disciples that they needed to go meet Him on the mountain in Galilee, because **“He is going on ahead of [them] ... there they will see Him.”** (Matthew 28:1-16.)

Jesus is moving on AHEAD of us, **not just in terms of the ethical and moral standards by which we live in the Kingdom of Heaven.** Jesus is also ALWAYS GOING ON AHEAD of us in our living.

When **Matthew Ditchen** and **J.F. Lalaria**, and **Ted Anderson**, and **the rest of the Mission of Peace folks** get to South Africa – **Jesus will have arrived ahead of them, preparing their way.**

When we came into the sanctuary today – before Jeff Mitchell came in and checked the thermostat and turned on the lights, before the Handbell choir came in for their 9:15 a.m. practice, before the Altar Guild came and did the beautiful work they did in arranging the chancel area, before the Ushers came and got the bulletins ready and the offering plates ready, and before the pastors came in to lead you in worship – JESUS GOT HERE AHEAD OF US and prayed for each one of you. And before you depart from this place to go where you go after worship, Jesus will ARRIVE AHEAD OF YOU.

Nowhere do you go that Jesus does not arrive first

- The **hospital** or even the **funeral home**
- The **classroom**
- The **workplace**
- The **long journey to places you will travel this month** ... even in 16<sup>o</sup> at Heinz Field this evening!

**Jesus IS ALWAYS THERE AHEAD OF YOU.**

**WITH** you.      **FOR** you.      **AHEAD** of you.

May that knowledge fill you and this season with abiding **HOPE**, **PEACE**, and **JOY**.      **In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.**