

I'm hesitant to say that God has a favorite Bible passage. I'm sure many of you do - I certainly do - but God, at the very least, might take issue with the idea that one of the many passages we read, one of the many genres available to us in our library of scripture, is favored above all others.

The Christmas season, however, certainly does. This is the third service in a row in which this passage from the Gospel of John has been read. The word became flesh and dwelt among us: that's the message of Christmas.

But this time, while reading this heady, gorgeous passage, what I was struck with was not the large, overarching neoplatonist philosophies or the deep image contrasts between light and darkness, but a simple preposition: the word *with*.

And as I thought about that little preposition, I realized something. Through that single word - the word *with* - our entire faith, and the instructions for how to *live* that faith - is described.

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God and the word was *with* God.

The Word was *with* God, and nothing came into being *without* God.

“The word became flesh and lived among us - lived *with* us.”

This is what the prophets assured us centuries before: “Behold, the young woman will conceive and bear a son, and they will name him Emmanuel, which means, “God is with us.”

Our faith is built on the preposition *with*.

And here's the thing: so much of our world, and so much of our life of faith, has tried to base itself on the word *for*. Think about the Christmas season, when we are compelled to do things *for* others: cook for her, and buy presents for him, give to charity for them. And these are good, noble, generous actions. But they don't cut to the heart of our faith, which ultimately is about restored relationships between ourselves, our God, and all of humanity. You can give a gift to someone and still have a gaping silence between you. You can give charity to the poor and still have no idea who they are or what matters to them. You can wear yourself out preparing a huge feast for your family and realize, after they left, you never actually got to spend time with them. *For* is a fine word, but it doesn't dismantle resentment, and it doesn't overcome misunderstanding, and it doesn't erase isolation, or alienation. *For* doesn't restore relationships.

With, however: the entire premise of the preposition with is a relationship between two things, Good or Bad.

The past year was a Hell of a year for many of us - and I mean that both literally and figuratively. Time and time again it felt as if shadows would surround us in an insurmountable way. Hope was stolen away from us as plans changed yet again. Our hearts were broken as we grieved beloveds. We were overwhelmed by the violence of the world, or the cynicism of the evening news, we fought with our neighbors and held strawmen arguments with political enemies - or stepparents - in our heads.

It was a tough year.

And yet. it's into that same world, that world of heartbreak and power and violence and despair that God was born among us and chose to be with us. God wasn't secluded among the comfortable, but born to an overwhelmed young

couple on the outskirts of town, surrounded by grimy animals and uneducated shepherds who needed a good shower. God was found among us by magi, brilliant sages who “weren’t from these parts,” whose religion was different but knew the truth they sought. God was born among us in a town occupied by an empire who didn't care about its people, who saw their bodies as a group to control and pockets to exploit, rather than people with purpose and meaning and lives that matter.

Into that world of heartbreak and power and violence and despair that God was born among us and chose to be with us. live with us. Love with us. Listen to our stories. Hear our pain and see our faces and restore our relationships with each other and with God Almighty, the maker of heaven and earth.

And I think this is central to why Jesus’ following was so transformative for so many: Jesus saw people in a way that no one had before. This baby grew up and said "blessed are the poor, Blessed are those who mourn, Blessed are the peacemakers: these are God’s children. He loved how, even in the midst of illness, a group of friends could rally around one guy to get him the help he needs, even if you have to cut a hole in a roof to do it. He listened to people in a way that no one had before. He treated women with the dignity - a healing balm in a world that insists on qualifying who matters. Each person was someone worth knowing in their own way - not for their own gain, or as a project to be fixed, but a person to spend time with. A name to say. A life story worth knowing. A relationship in need of restoration.

Sure, there was an element of the preposition *for* in Jesus’ life. He was for us when he healed and taught, he was for us when he died on the cross, he was for

us when he rose from the grave and ascended into heaven. These are things only God could do. But God only did those things *for* us because he was *with* us.

We have all too often done this thing called “celebrating Christmas.” We hand out lots of gifts, we eat lots of food, and we put up signs as if we have to fight to keep Christ in a world that he’s already all over, whether or not we live as if it’s true. But Christmas is an orientation all its own, centered entirely on the preposition *with*.

This is the moment that this Methodist pastor reminds you of John Wesley’s final words on his deathbed: “Best of all, God is with us.”

Best of all: God is with us.

So let’s orient ourselves to Christmas all year round. Let’s celebrate Christmas by being *with*. By getting to know people in poverty and distress even when there’s nothing we can do for them. By being with people in grief and sadness even when you have no idea what to say. By being with and listening to and walking with those we find so difficult. By being with God in prayer, even when it feels like unproductive time.

It’s a radical, transforming love, to show up again and again, and build relationships not for our own sake, not to make ourselves feel good or look good but because God is with us. It’s not easy. We know that already - It would have been easier for God to do it on God’s own. But God chose to do it *with* us. Even though it cost him everything.

God is here. This world full of brokenness, of tyrannical leaders and broken families and seemingly unsolvable problems? This is the world God loves. These

less-than-perfect moments, where chaos and anxiety grow as hope diminishes?

These are the places God is with us.

That's the power of our Christmas story. And so even in January, even as the lights get packed away for another year, let us become a Christmas people, oriented around the word *with*.

I leave you this morning with my favorite poem by the Rev. Howard Thurman, chaplain to Howard and then Boston University in the mid-20th century, the Work of Christmas:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among others,
To make music in the heart.

Best of all, God is with us.

Amen.