

Here we are together in our beautiful holy space once again for a Christmas Eve. I'd love to shout "We're back!" But it is kind of a muted return: It's more of a "Many of us are back." We have endured a lot over the last couple of years, haven't we? We have suffered from isolation, fear of the unknown, sickness and exhaustion from this pandemic that never seems to end.

It has sapped our spirit, sorely tried our patience, and for some for whom we continue to pray, it has made their health precarious. We have lost loved ones to this disease, and we've lost loved ones to *other* diseases who died with their masks on, so to speak... in some form of isolation. And many have been buried these last two years from most of their friends and family.

Who is it then, who comes to us from God, to bridge the distance we have from each other and from our Creator? He is the Messiah, the Lord, the Savior, the Redeemer, the Prince of Peace, Emmanuel.

We have so many names for this Jesus, born of Mary and the person of God who requires no mask, no social distancing and no vaccinations. No matter what the disease, calamity or war, God is with us. That's what Emmanuel means in Hebrew and in Greek. God is with us.

And God has been with us all along through life. We are experiencing, of course, yet another Christmas of careful planning to keep ourselves and others safe. There have been many melancholy Christmases before; Christmas 2001 after the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Christmas 2012 after the death of so many children and adults in the shooting at the Sandy Hook Elementary School. And of course, there have been many, many Christmases spent when our nation has been at war. One of the worst events in modern history being the Christmas after the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

When we gather during or after awful events, to celebrate the Incarnation of our Lord, we may wonder how God continues to let these tragedies happen. If God loves us so much, where is the Life and Light we hear about? Where is the mercy of the Merciful One? How can we say that Emmanuel, God with us, is actually WITH us?

We say it, because we Christians believe and trust in it. Yes, the Holy One **is** here. Yes, we see God around us in experiences large and small. Yes, we believe the promises God has made to us. We see the promises coming to pass, even in difficult years.

God is with us! The gentle snowfall and snow-covered trees today on Christmas eve! What a little blessing. The phone calls, emails and texts we send and receive from friends and loved ones. The beautiful music we hear this afternoon from talented musicians which warms our hearts and souls. Thank you for this gift to all of us, Christine and chamber musicians and choir.

God was with them! There were dread diseases, wars, and famines in the times in which our scripture was written, just as today. The passage from Isaiah comes from the later years of the 8th century BCE.

The Assyrians had already attacked and captured the Hebrews who lived in the Northern Kingdom. Their capital, Samaria fell and they were never heard from again. King Hezekiah and his people in the Southern Kingdom worried about foreigners attacking their city of Jerusalem. Their capture and removal to Babylonia was still in their future. And all the while they knew God was with them.

The Letter to Titus was written in about 60 CE and times were dangerous then too. As Paul was gathering people in house churches in Asia Minor and Europe, the Roman Pax Romana was in full swing. The people then were governed with a heavy and unyielding hand.

At the time of the birth of Jesus, King Herod was the tyrant in Jerusalem who feared anyone who might try to usurp his power. The birth of a baby to poor parents in a backwater village called Bethlehem was of no consequence to Herod, at least as the apostle Luke tells the story. Instead, we are invited to celebrate, to turn away from our fears, and to visit and worship the baby Jesus with shepherds and angels.

God is with all of us at Trinity Church as we have labored long to restore these beautiful windows. It turns out to be one of God's little coincidences that we were out of the church while much of this restoration was going on. It was January 13 of 2020 when the altar windows were removed. There was plywood in the church windows for many months. And it was on November 1st of this year when *almost* all of the remaining windows were returned to us, newly leaded, and sparkling clean and repaired. We lack one window, the Holy Spirit dove window. It will be completed in the spring. Then it will be time for a real celebration when that one is finally returned to us. Do we dare to dream that Covid might subside and we can gather for a true all-parish celebration? I have hope of that. God will bring us through. God's inspiration to scientists, doctors, nurses and aids, artists and craftspeople will bring this about.

God has also inspired many of us to give of our resources for this immense effort of restoration. For many of us, this was sacrificial giving for a cause greater than ourselves. Thank you to all the donors and for your inspiration and unflagging work on this, Susanna Schindler, the chairperson of the Stained-Glass Rescue Committee.

If this is the first time you are seeing the newly bright, sparkling windows since their return you may have questions about them. Feel free to ask me or Susanna following this service.

God is with us in our mission of being companions along the Way to each other, our friends and neighbors. This has continued despite all we've been through. Our artists keep painting. Our Altar guild keeps polishing the brass. And our important ministry with the Hispanic population of our area has grown and flourished under the leadership of Pastor John Carter. Many of us here have supported this ministry and kept hope alive for those who lost their jobs or health during the pandemic.

Emmanuel. It means God is with us. The message of our scripture this afternoon is that God is truly with us despite our fears, and despite the things going on in our world and in our lives. God is with us in the small things we might not notice. How about the fact that we look for the smile we can see in

each other's eyes - even if we cannot see their whole face. Have you noticed how people are smiling with their eyes?

Our connection with each other in this small way mirrors our connection with the One who made us, the One who saves us from ourselves, and the One who sustains us every day.