

**“What to do with Emmanuel?”** – Tyler Goss

Church family, it's good to be home! It is good to be here with you today. You know, I have grown to really value the Christmas season...not because of presents under the tree, not because I can live vicariously through the tacky-light yards of others, but because Christmas is a time to look back from where we've come from, and look ahead to where we're going.

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Christmas usually entails visiting family: parents, children, siblings, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, grandchildren, grandparents, cousins, Uncle Larry. Christmas is about returning to your roots, to the family systems that raised you, and perhaps, for some of you, it's even about returning to your old stomping grounds, the physical location where you grew up.

Christmas is a time to look back from where we've come from, but it also is a chance to look ahead. In the few days off from work or school, you get a bit more time to think about the year to come, you make New Year's resolutions, you re-evaluate what you want the next year to look like, and, if you are a student like me, you always get that one question over Christmas break that you never get tired of, “So what's next?” What are your plans for after graduation? Christmas is a time to look ahead to where we're going.

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So that’s Christmas for us individually, where have we come from, where are we going, but collectively, as followers of Christ, Christmas also reminds us where we have been in this whole God story. Before Jesus met us in the manger, the prophets of old had this hope. The prophet Isaiah says,

“Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.  
Every valley shall be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
and the rough places a plain.  
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed”

Jesus was to come to level mountains, raise up valleys, and when God incarnate, this Messiah who met us in the manger, when this Jesus walked here among us, He said, “The first shall be last, and the last shall be first.” Jesus raised up some valleys, right, he restored the sight of the blind, released the captives, spoke good news to the poor and let the oppressed free.

But he also called out the mountains, those who had corrupted their power: The Pharisees who put their love of law above the law of love, King Herod who schmoozed with the power of the Roman Empire. Even the Roman Empire itself, the very weapon it used to intimidate, to suppress, to execute, Jesus transforms the cross, a symbol of defeat and oppression into a symbol of salvation, liberation, and victory. This Jesus, this great

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leveler of power first meets us in the manger. So, over Christmas, we look back to this hope in a manger, this time when God put on flesh and met us where we are, we look back to Emmanuel. “Emmanuel,” a name for Jesus that translates to “God with us”, but what do we make of this “God with us” going forward? How do we take this hope in a manger into our future. What do we do with Emmanuel, God with us as we leave the Christmas season?

For our scripture today, we’re going to be camping out in Acts 17, because we find here a story about Paul, a steadfast follower of Jesus, who is trying to take this Emmanuel into the future. Like you and me, Paul never saw Jesus walking and talking on earth. Sure he had this encounter of the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus, but Paul, like you and me, didn’t know the in-the-flesh Jesus when he lived here on earth, he only knows Jesus from the way Jesus lives in him. So, Paul, with his buddy Silas, is on a proclamation spree. He’s traveling from city to city, pulling an Oprah Winfrey, proclaiming, “You get the good news, you get the good news, everybody gets the good news!!”

And, understandably so, not everybody gets behind the good news. The two cities from our scripture today are prime examples of these mixed reviews. First Paul and Silas make their way to the important Roman city called Thessalonica. Paul and Silas, as is their custom, start proclaiming from the Jewish synagogue of the city. So,

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for three Sabbath days, Paul tells them of Jesus. Now, some of them were persuaded, including a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women, but scripture says that the “Jews became jealous, and with the help of some ruffians in the marketplaces they formed a mob and set the city in an uproar.” Thessa-nolika this Paul guy!

Usually, when I preach a sermon, I like to tie in a good story to help spice things up, but this story is juicy enough as it is! Paul’s all like, “Jesus, what a guy! You should follow him” and the devout Greeks and leading women are all like, “yeah, ok, sound reasonable, we’re in” but then the Jews are all like “They may take our lives, but They will never take our freedom!” They get the ruffians in the marketplace to cause an uproar, they start a search party, and when they can’t get ahold of Paul and Silas they go after some dude Jason. Wait, Jason? Yeah supposedly some dude named Jason was entertaining Paul and Silas as guests, so the angry crowd is all like, “we’re angry at Paul and Silas...but we can’t get ahold of them...so instead we’ll get...Jason!” And they drag Jason and other believers before the city authorities, shouting, “These people are turning the world upside down, and worse, get this, oh powerful city authorities who follow the commands of the Roman emperor, Paul and Silas are saying...they are saying there is another king, another person in charge, Jesus...You might want to stop them!”

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So, that’s one way people may react to the good news about Jesus. But then, that very night, Paul and Silas sneak off to Beroea. Beroea is also a city under Roman rule, but thankfully it is outside the jurisdiction of the Thessalonian authorities. So, Paul and Silas do their thing again. They start proclaiming from the Jewish synagogue of Beroea. ‘Cause, you know, as they say, If at first you get attacked by a mob, maybe try those exact same tactics next time. But this time, it actually works!

Acts 17:11 starts out, “These Jews were more receptive than those in Thessalonica, for they welcomed the message very eagerly and examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so.” The Beroeans get on board, “including not a few Greek women and men of high standing.”

Eventually the Thessalonian Jews get wind of Paul and Silas in Beroea, so they go there and try to stir up the crowds of Beroea. Thus Paul leaves Silas to support the Beroean believers and he himself heads off to Athens.

There it is, a tale of two cities...it was the best of times, it was the worst of times. Rejection and acceptance. Paul wanted to tell the synagogues about this Jesus who suffered under Roman rule yet conquered death, this Jesus who met him on the road to Damascus and transformed his life forever, this Jesus, Emmanuel, who was, is, and will be God with us. So church, where do we go from the message of Christmas? One city revolted, the other rejoiced. And our answer for today,

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about where we’re going from here, about what we do with Emmanuel going forward lies not so much in the life of Paul, but in the story of these two cities, Thessalonica and Beroea.

Let’s start with Thessalonica. Why did the Jews of the synagogue get so upset at Paul’s message in the first place? Why did they find it necessary to rope in a few ruffians and stir up a crowd? If they didn’t like his message, why didn’t they just say, “nope not for us...thank you!”? Well notice who is getting on board with Paul’s message, Acts 17:4 says, “Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.” These devout Greeks were not pagans, they were at the synagogue after all, interested in this God of Abraham, they were devout, but they also were still Greeks. Not fully Jewish, more like Jew-ish. Paul is coming in and taking those the Jews are slowly winning over. Paul is taking their fan club, their potential converts!

Then, notice too that it’s not only the devout Greeks who get on board, but it is also the leading women. I mean, for one, being a Jewish synagogue and all, I would guess that most non-Jewish men are not going to be head-over-heels about all this circumcision talk, so it makes sense that perhaps more women are present and listening in than men, but also notice that they are *leading* women. Women of status, women of power,

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women of wealth. And while you may think that in that ancient society there were very specific gender roles, you would be right, men ruled the public sphere and women oversaw the private, the household, thus the household finances were kept by the women. Paul wasn't just taking the Greek fan club, but a significant financial support of the synagogue! And to top it all off, Jews understood the idea of the Messiah, but the Messiah Paul was preaching about didn't fit their understanding.

The messiah is supposed to liberate us from our oppressors, not die on a cross to them!

The messiah is supposed to come for Israel, not these devout Greeks.

The Messiah is supposed to fit within our religious power structures, and now Paul is preaching about a movement that welcomes women to a place of importance.

Those are our followers, our finances, that's our Messiah you're messing with! Of course the Jews would be upset!

Notice, when Paul goes to Beroea, the same scenario begins to unfold. Acts 17:12 says, “Many of them therefore believed, including not a few Greek women and men of high standing.” Paul, in Beroea, is winning over the Greeks and the prominent women again, as before! And while we don't know the exact message

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Paul preached to the Bereans, something tells me it had to do with this controversial Messiah. But the Bereans...the Bereans were more receptive than those in Thessalonica. These devout Greeks and leading women were taking this movement forward no matter how the Jews in the synagogue reacted. Through angry mobs of Thessalonica and listening ears of Berea, those leaning in from the outskirts were on board.

Church family, let me make this real for a second, this is West Richmond Church of the Brethren...but if you are not quote unquote “Brethren,” You married into the faith, you just attend here because it is close by, or perhaps you are Brethren but you never fully feel part of the “in” crowd, I want you to hear the message of Acts 17, of those devout Greeks and leading women who were integral to the Jesus movement. I want you to hear that while you may feel like you are on the outskirts leaning in, you are valued, you are welcomed, you are a gift, you have a place. Sometimes Brethren can be a bit like the Jews of the synagogue. We have our own idea of how church works, of what our Messiah looks and acts like, we even have “The Brethren Name Game,” that unfortunately helps us maintain a sense of who is in and who is out, But if you are one of those who, like the devout Greeks, are leaning into this whole Brethren thing, I want you to notice how in Acts 17, it is those people who take the Jesus movement forward. It is

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those people who believe in this Jesus business, and run with it!

Now, I am not saying Brethren need to abandon our traditions, there is a beauty and and deep theological richness to our heritage, but at its core, we are just trying to be disciples of Christ, continuing the work of our master. So, if you are leaning in and can get behind continuing the work of Jesus. We need you. Teach us about this Jesus you have come to know.

And, that’s what it’s about isn’t it. This Jesus we have each come to know. Now, church family, I don’t know about you, but I get a little uneasy about the whole proclamation business. I mean, I can get behind the actions of Jesus, modeling my life after his loving compassion, but when it comes to actually telling others about Jesus, as Paul did so boldly, I get a bit uneasy. Who am I to tell others what to think? I mean, I know what I believe, what makes sense to me, but “mission,” “evangelism”...I don’t know if I can get behind those words. I have seen mission and evangelism do as much harm as good. Do I want to be associated with those words?

Well, here’s the thing I have come to understand, evangelism, at its best, is not about convincing others of some theology. It’s not about telling others if they get into heaven or not. Evangelism, at its best, is not about proclaiming information, proclaiming limiting theology, evangelism, at its best, is about proclaiming relationship.

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We are first told the story of Paul on his way to Damascus because it is on that journey where Paul first experiences Christ. Where Paul is confronted, transformed, empowered, and made-anew in Christ. Paul’s proclamation is rooted in his relationship with Christ.

You know, when I was growing up in this church, the things that pulled me in were relationships. As a kid, one of the favorite times in my week were Wednesday nights because that meant all the kids of the parents in the choir got to hangout as our parents practiced. We’d spend that hour every week climbing on the playground, running around playing tag, we once even went through this phase of pretending to be secret agents. We each had spy names and we played spies, protecting the church from the evil villains that lurked in the shadows of the honeysuckle bush. Church was and is about relationships, about community, playing spies at choir practice and all.

But, you know, looking back, it wasn’t only about relationships with each other...it was about relationship with Christ. When I was baptized, I remember my Uncle Larry gave me a necklace from his youth. It had a cross on it. Jesus meant something to him growing up, so he passed on not a necklace, but a relationship. Every birthday or Christmas I would get a card from Henry and Ansuya Solanky, and in their cards, they spared no space to tell me about what Christ means to them.

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Sunday school with Terrie Glass, serving at Hull Street Shelter with Aunt Barbara, sitting in a circle for love feast surrounded by feet. There better be a relationship with Christ at the center of love feast, otherwise it's just a bunch of stinky feet! The list can go on, but my point is, church family, you have a relationship with Christ, each one of you. You have experienced Christ in some small way, or in some big way. And, hopefully, you are still discovering Christ anew each day. Start from that relationship, but don't keep it to yourself...or even within these congregational walls. I have been blessed to be shaped by your relationship with Christ. Thanks for sharing, but don't stop with me or even with those in this sanctuary today. You are not called to have all the theological answers, to know who gets into heaven, or even if there is a heaven. You are called to be in relationship with Christ, and proclaim that relationship to everyone. Thessalonica, Berea, Richmond. Evangelism, at its best, starts with relationship.

So, family, I invite you to leave this Christmas season discovering afresh your relationship with our Lord. How has Christ healed you, how has Christ liberated you? Empowered you? Start with that relationship. Proclaim that relationship, but also remember to welcome the relationship others have with our Lord. Remember that it is the devout Greeks and prominent women who took the Jesus movement forward. Those on the outskirts, those not on the in-crowd. They had ideas, they had

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their own relationship with God, they had gifts, and resources. Listen to them, welcome them, make a place for them. Because, with Jesus, the first shall be last, and the last shall be first. The way of Jesus confronts harmful power structures, even ones involving an “in” crowd in our own denomination, and flips them like tables in the temple, and welcomes in the unexpected leveling Kingdom of God. Jesus met us in the Manger. Emmanuel, God with us. God with us. It’s this relationship that transforms us, empowers us, and invites us to journey into our future together.

**Benediction:**

May you leave this Christmas season blessed with relationship.

May you be reminded of your relationships with others: others who have formed you, others who are leaning in to the faith, and even others who you too can form.

But may you also discover anew your relationship with Christ, Emmanuel, God with us, who met us in the manger then, and meets us where we are today.