

**Dave Johnson**

**Sermon: “God Cares about the Lonely” (Matthew 1:18-25)**

**December 19, 2010**

When I was a little kid growing up in the 70’s I had a clock radio in my room that was on almost all the time, usually tuned to a pop hits station. I grew up listening to the great singer-songwriters of that era—Elton John, James Taylor, Carole King, Billy Joel and yes, even Barry Manilow ☺. One singer-songwriter who had a few hits was Eric Carmen, whose biggest hit was *All by Myself*, a heartbreaking ballad in which he sings in the chorus:

All by myself. Don’t wanna be by myself anymore.

All by myself. Don’t wanna live by myself anymore.

It’s a beautiful song, but not exactly a pick-me-up—in fact if you’re feeling melancholy but would rather feel certifiably depressed, this is the perfect song for you ☺. And yet I still remember really liking that song, not just because of its beautiful melody but because something about it resonated with me. *All by Myself* was a hit in 1976, the year my family moved to a new neighborhood and I started going to a new school. It was a lonely season in my life—I hadn’t made any friends yet and sitting by myself in my room listening to Eric Carmen singing about not wanting to be alone anymore connected with me.

Maybe you weren’t into Eric Carmen. Maybe you listened to *The Police* (I did—still do), whose chorus to their 1978 hit, *So Lonely*, was a little more to the point as Sting, Andy and Stuart screamed, “So lonely, so lonely, so lonely, so lonely, so lonely, so lonely, so lonely.” Or perhaps you prefer Roy Orbison, whose 1960 classic, *Only the Lonely*, says it all:

Only the lonely know the way I feel tonight

Only the lonely know this feelin’ ain’t right

Loneliness is something all of us experience at times throughout our lives, from being a seven-year old in a new neighborhood to being an octogenarian in a retirement home. One afternoon last year I went to Morningside of Charlottesville, an assisted living center, to make some pastoral visits. As I was walking across the parking lot I crossed paths with an elderly lady pushing a stroller. She was laughing and chatting happily and I assumed she was enjoying some time with her grandchild. But as I got closer I saw that there was no child, but rather a stuffed bear, dressed and buckled in the stroller. This poor lady was chatting with a stuffed bear. She must have noticed the puzzled look on my face, because after I said, “Good morning” to her, she responded, “Good morning” and continued, “I’m not crazy... just lonely.”

There are a lot of lonely people in the world, not just at Morningside, but everywhere. During the holiday season this loneliness is often magnified; it goes from being an ancillary concern to

being front and center. Last week I was reading an online article about this in which the writer observed:

“The holiday season is generally thought of as a time of joy and love, but for many people, it’s a time of loneliness. Some people live far from family and miss seeing their loved ones this time of year; others dread going to holiday parties and New Year’s Eve celebrations without a partner and end up staying home. It’s also common for people to feel emotional distance from the people they’re with, thus feeling lonely even if they’re in a room full of people. For those who feel lonely during the holidays, this time of year can be a time of additional stress” (Elizabeth Scott, *about.com*).

Even in the midst of the hustle and bustle of holiday shopping at some point you will inevitably hear Elvis Presley’s classic 1957 hit, *Blue Christmas* in which The King sings:

I'll have a blue Christmas without you; I'll be so blue thinking about you.  
Decorations of red on a green Christmas tree.  
Won't mean a thing if you're not here with me.

People who are estranged from family members may feel extra lonely during the holidays. Single people may feel especially lonely this time of year—someone who has always wanted to be married but has yet to meet the right person, or a parent who is divorced and must wait until next year to spend Christmas Day with their kids, or a widow or widower facing their first Christmas without their beloved spouse. Married people can also feel lonely during the holidays as some feel estranged from their spouse or disconnected from their kids.

Leaders are often lonely people. There’s some truth to the saying, “It’s lonely at the top.” I’ve had many conversations with leaders of different kinds—political leaders, entrepreneurs, school principals, clergy, leaders of student groups, heads of companies, head coaches. Being at the top isn’t always all it’s cracked up to be; sometimes the top can be a very lonely place.

This past week *Time* magazine named Mark Zuckerberg, the co-founder of *Facebook*, as its Person of the Year. At age 27 he the second-youngest person ever given this honor (if you’re wondering who the youngest was; it’s Charles Lindberg who was twenty-five). There are now over 500 million users of *Facebook*. People use *Facebook* because they want to connect with people (or perhaps stalk them or out-brag them ☺). And yet, I would bet that the majority of those 500 million people still get lonely--sometimes even *Facebook* cannot touch the lonely spot.

But here’s the good news: God cares about the lonely.

In today’s gospel reading on this fourth and final Sunday of Advent we see that God cares about the lonely, that Jesus became incarnate to be *with* us. Matthew tells us that the birth of Jesus Christ of the Virgin Mary fulfilled an Old Testament prophecy found in Isaiah: “the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means ‘God is with us’” (Matthew 1:23; Isaiah 7:14). In fact, there are eleven times in Matthew’s account of the gospel

in which we see different aspects of Jesus' life, ministry, and death fulfilling a specific Old Testament prophecy, and the very first of these is that Jesus came to be with us.

God is with us. God cares about the lonely.

And the fact that God is with us and cares for the lonely is found in several places in the Old Testament.

After Moses died a young man named Joshua became the new leader in Israel, and he felt completely overwhelmed, but God reassured him: "Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for *the LORD your God is with you* wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9).

King David, who was no stranger to being alone, famously wrote of the comforting presence of God, even in the face of death: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for *thou art with me*" (Psalm 23:4, KJV).

When Israel was in exile in Assyria God spoke these comfortable words to them through the prophet Isaiah: "When you pass through the waters, *I will be with you*; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you" (43:2).

And yet as Christians we may know God is with us, but we still feel lonely sometimes. This is because there are some tensions in the Christian faith.

One of the tensions of the Christian faith is the tension between "the already" and "the not yet." As Christians we live in an "in between" time. It's sort of like the time between the proposal and the wedding—you are *already* engaged but you are *not yet* actually married—or like the time between the date you get an offer on a house and the closing date—you *already* have a contract on the house but you have *not yet* closed on it. "In between" times can be exciting, but stressful too.

As Christians, yes, we have *already* been saved, but we have *not yet* experienced the fullness of our salvation; yes, we have *already* been delivered from the power of sin, but we have *not yet* experienced full victory over the sin in our lives; yes, we have *already* beheld the power of God in our lives, but we have *not yet* beheld God face to face.

And during this season of Advent there is one already/not yet tension that is front and center: yes, Christ has *already* come, but he has *not yet* come back. During Advent we are reminded that as Christians we live in an "in between" time.

The young adult/college years can be one of the most exciting and stressful and yet lonely "in between" times in our lives. When it comes to studies I have never been the math/science type—I've always preferred the humanities. In college although I majored in European History and Biblical Literature (good move), I minored in Business (bad move) because I have never been the math/science type. One of the business classes I took was called Quantitative Analysis,

which involved applying principles of stochastic calculus to finance. What is stochastic calculus you ask? Well, according to the website Wikipedia (the authority of all things ☺), “Stochastic calculus is a branch of mathematics that operates on stochastic processes. It allows a consistent theory of integration to be defined for integrals of stochastic processes with respect to stochastic processes. It is used to model systems that behave randomly.” I still have no idea at all what that means (although my approach to life is often a system that “behaves randomly” ☺). I felt utterly lost in that class. And yet when I look back on college, that class was one of my favorites, not because of the subject, about which I was clueless, but because there were friends in the class with me. I still remember exchanging panicked expressions in class and laughing while walking out of class together, commenting: “What was *that* all about—I am *so* lost.” That class was one of my favorites because my friends and I were clueless together. I was not alone.

Of course in the big scheme of things struggling in a Quantitative Analysis class is no big deal—and there are “in between” times that are much more challenging than the young adult/college years, like the “in between” time between separation and divorce, or the “in between” time between losing a job and finding another one, or the “in-between” time between the diagnosis of a terminal illness and death. Those “in between” times can be the loneliest of all.

But God cares about the lonely. God cares about us especially during the “in between” times. For the same Jesus, Emmanuel, “God incarnate man divine” is the ultimate demonstration that God is with us and that God cares for the lonely. He was lonely when growing up being considered illegitimate by his neighbors in Nazareth. He was lonely while being tempted in the wilderness by Satan. He was lonely while leading his disciples whose primary concern was about which of them was the greatest. He was lonely when he was flogged and mocked by the Roman soldiers. He was lonely as he cried from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

But the good news of the Gospel is that Jesus was raised on the third day, and that he will come back some day just as he promised. And more than that, during our earthly life, the “in between” time we all have between birth and death, Jesus is with us all the time, every second. Matthew’s account of the Gospel which begins with Jesus birth as Emmanuel, “God with us,” closes with the promise Jesus made to his disciples at the Great Commission: “Remember, *I am with you always*, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20b).

And at the end of the age Jesus will return—and all the “in between” times will be over and all the lonely people in the world will be lonely no more, for as we read in Revelation: “(God) will dwell *with* them; they will be his peoples, and *God himself will be with them*; he will wipe every tear from their eyes” (Revelation 21:3-4).

So if this morning you are in a lonely “in between” place in your life, be encouraged, for on this Fourth Sunday of Advent the good news of the gospel is that we are not alone—God is with us and God cares about the lonely. Amen.