

Dear Friends in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Savior Jesus the Christ. Amen.

It was Johnny's first day in First Grade and because it was raining he wore a cap and jacket to school. Johnny participated in the morning activities but when he saw that it was 12 o'clock, he got up and went and got his jacket and headed for the door. "Where are you going, Johnny?" asked the teacher. "I'm going home, I always go home at 12 o'clock. I'm done for the day." "Oh no, you can't go home, you have about three more hours before you can go," said the teacher. "Three more hours, who signed me up for this?"

Jesus had been baptized, the Holy Spirit came down upon Him and a voice from heaven said, "This is my son, my beloved, in him I am well pleased." Then the Spirit led Jesus out to the desert to be tempted by the devil after fasting forty days and forty nights. Jesus could have said the same as Johnny, "Who signed me up for this?"

God did! God had declared that Jesus was his beloved son—a son of God or God. This sounds wonderful but what did the readers of Matthew's account think about this? They had been living under the rule of the Roman Empire and the Caesar or emperor in Rome. The Caesars had a tendency to see themselves as a god and made that known. So now, as a person reads this account of Jesus, they might have thought, "One more god. Will this one be any different than the others? Probably not!"

The people of Matthew's day, living about 40 years after Jesus' ministry, knew some things about how Rome operated. Rome would send food to areas to get the people to settle down, to placate them. Rome also spent time and energy entertaining its citizens. The Colosseum in Rome had numbered seats and even the poor were given seats to watch animals or gladiators fight. Rome also had control over many nations or countries and kept an iron hand on them.

So this son of God, will he be any different? The tempter tells Jesus to change stones into bread and feed the people; to jump off the Temple and amaze people, dazzle them; and appealed to the human impulse to have control or domination over others.

But Jesus says No to each of these: bread is good but the word that comes from God is more important. Don't manipulate or use God to gain attention. And when it comes to ruling over countries, worship only God, not power. The readers may have heard Jesus say No and thought, Whoa! This son of God is different than the Caesars and Rome. And they would have heard a common thread in Jesus' answers: God.

This temptation story is a rebuttal of how the Roman empire operated and it offered a different vision of life. The question is then raised, what kind of god will this Jesus be? The answer is found in chapter one of Matthew: Joseph is considering how to divorce Mary when in a vision an angel speaks to him and says, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for what is conceived in her is by the Holy Spirit. You shall name him Jesus, which means "He will save" and then adds a passage from Isaiah 7, "and his name shall be Emmanuel, which means God with us." God with us? God is with us!

What does it mean that God is with us? What if it means an atmosphere of God around, over, under and with us? For those who have been watching the Olympics, on one of the last nights, you may have seen Alysia Liu, win the Women's Skating Gold Medal. What you would have seen as she did it was a sheer sense of happiness and joy as she skated. It seemed like there was an atmosphere of pure joy and happiness surrounding her. What if that is meant when Jesus is given the name Emmanuel? That Jesus brings a sense of God, God's peace, God's joy, God's comfort to us, enveloping us in an atmosphere of God!

Psalm 23 describes this atmosphere, green fields, quiet waters, a presence when going through the Valley of deep darkness or death. Paul talks about this atmosphere in the eighth chapter of his letter to the Romans: there is beautiful Bible Camp song that sums it up—"For I persuaded to believe nothing can separate us from the wonderful love of God. From above He will save us, if we let him live within while in this sinful we live. Neither heights nor depths, nor principalities, nor things present nor things to come, tho the devil hate us he can never separate us from the wonderful love of God.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor was arrested by Hitler for participating in plots to overthrow Hitler. He was imprisoned in Berlin for a while at the time the Allied air forces were heavily bombing Berlin. As the bombs fell, Bonhoeffer heard the screams of terror and fear from some prisoners. Bonhoeffer would speak to them, pray with them and maybe said something like this is really scary and dangerous, and maybe we won't survive the bombings, but if we do die, know that Jesus will hold us with his hands and arms that are strong and will carry us into the fullness of His kingdom. God with us to the end and the new beginning.

But how does Emmanuel, God is with us in some of the less tragic or dangerous times? How will he be with us when we ask questions like: Who am I? What am I? How am I to live with the different questions and challenges I have? How do I fit in? How do I decide what I want to do, where I should go, what to do in my life? Does Emmanuel have anything for me when I'm not sure about so much?

Alcoholics Anonymous has as its basic premise, that a power greater than ourselves can restore us to sobriety. The apostle Paul said something similar when he said, "May the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Paul is talking about an atmosphere that Jesus spreads around us, over us, under us—an atmosphere. "Peace I give to you, not as the world gives but as I give," said Jesus. A presence of God with us.

What kind of God is this Jesus, the readers may have asked, the answer is a God that comes to be with us and help us live in a new life with God.

Let us pray: Dear Lord, help us breathe deeply of your Word and Presence. Amen