

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT | DECEMBER 18, 2022

ISAIAH 7:10-16 | PSALM 80:1-7, 17-19 | ROMANS 1:1-7 | MATTHEW 1:18-25

This week, we're wrapping up our time with James Martin's *Learning to Pray*. Each week, we've taken one theme from the book and put it in conversation with the week's readings. So far, we've done transformation, honesty, and expectations. And this week we're going to think about presence. And we're close enough to Christmas that I need to clarify that's presence ending in "ence," not "ents."

About a thousand years ago, this man named Vladimir was the prince of Kyiv. And he made some military agreement with the Byzantine Empire that involved a bunch of weapons and strategic marriages. And for one reason or another this deal also included a clause that Vladimir would convert to some religious practice. Vladimir didn't really know what kind of practice he was supposed to adopt, so he got a bunch of his aides together and said, "You're going to go travel all around and report back to me about the different ways people worship. And then I can make a decision."

So his assistants go and travel all around and report back on what they find. There's a funny moment early on where they worship with in some Germanic village. And they say, essentially, "You know, it was fine. Wouldn't be my first choice, but you could do worse." But eventually they end up at the Byzantine Hagia Sophia in modern-day Istanbul. And this is the report they sent back to Vladimir: "We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth; for on earth there is no such vision or beauty, and we do not know how to describe it; we only know that God dwells there among men."¹

What's interesting, for our purposes, isn't whether Vladimir chose the Germanic practices or the Byzantine ones. (Take a guess.) It's the experience these aides had when they went into the Hagia Sophia. *We didn't know whether we were in heaven or on earth. We only know that God dwells there.*

Maybe you have your own kind of Hagia Sophia, a place where you feel like you're in the presence of God. Maybe it's a real place. A church where the light hits the stained glass just right. Maybe it's a hymn with a melody that gets you every time. It could be a day on our liturgical calendar or a prayer that you come back to. But it's that place that we return to to be in God's presence.

And it's good to have this place you can go to and be in the presence of God. Except there's one small problem: at some point, you have to leave. Eventually Vladimir's assistants had to leave the Hagia Sophia and head back home. You notice that when they described this experience they said, "God dwells *there*." Meaning it doesn't really feel like God dwells here. And we might feel the same way. Even if we have a place where we feel like we're in the presence of God, we can't stay there. And so we spend much of our lives feeling like God is at a distance. God dwells over there. And we try to get there from time to time.

That desire is also at the heart of today's gospel reading. St. Matthew tells us about a dream Joseph had where he had a conversation with an angel. And if you think back to your Hebrew Bible stories, dreams are often where people get important messages from God. (Think of Jacob's ladder or Joseph and his brothers.) So this angel appears to Joseph and says, "Look, [Mary] shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel." Matthew helpfully explains that Emmanuel means "God is with us." The title Emmanuel reminds us that God isn't just *there*. But God is *here*.

For the characters in the nativity story, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and all the rest, this makes sense. Jesus is *here*. In the flesh. In the manger. Go over there and look for yourself. And it would be

¹ Accounts of this story vary, but additional information is in Tim Dowley, *A Short Introduction to the History of Christianity* (Fortress Press, 2018), 206.

easy for all of us to feel left out. Because we weren't alive when Jesus was actually here, actually Emmanuel. We're about two thousand years late to the party.

But Jesus isn't just Emmanuel for the characters in the nativity story. Jesus is Emmanuel for all of us. Because Jesus has been raised from death and given us the gift of the Holy Spirit, Jesus remains present within and among us. There is no place, no experience we have in life that we aren't in the presence of God. To say that Jesus is Emmanuel doesn't mean that God used to be with us two thousand years ago in this one little sliver of the world. It means that God is with us this day and always through the power of the Holy Spirit. So when we sing "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" next weekend, we'll sing, "pleased with us in flesh to dwell, Jesus, *our* Immanuel."

So what does this have to do with prayer? Well, we often make prayer into our own little Hagia Sophia. When I pray, I'm in the presence of God. And then I stop praying, and I go out and try to make a go of it on my own. And when I get tired or worn out, I go pray again so I can be in God's presence and recharge my batteries. But if Jesus is God with us now, then it means we're never really making a go of it on our own. We're always living with God. As St. Augustine once put it, God is "closer to me than I am to myself."²

One of the ways that Martin talks about the presence of God in his book is through the practice of centering prayer. Many of the prayer practices that Martin talks about and that we've done together have steps or a process. Ignatian contemplation has a process. The Examen has steps. Lectio Divina has questions. Centering prayer is the absence of a process. Martin describes it simply as "placing yourself in God's presence." So many of you have probably done centering prayer without realizing that's what you're doing. It's simply being in the presence of God. And if you're like me and can't sit still without your mind running a million places, you can pick a word or two from a scripture reading or the Lord's Prayer and simply return to that word when you notice your attention drifting off. Return to the word, return to your breath, return to God's presence.

And the point of centering prayer is not that spending time with God recharges your batteries so you can crush your to-do-list. The gift of centering prayer is that it helps focus our attention on the ways God is with us not just when I'm choosing to put myself in God's presence, but the ways God is present to us throughout our days.

If you think back to that story of Vladimir's associates standing in the Hagia Sophia, it's easy to understand why they felt like God was there. It's got these enormous murals. The prayers would have been echoing off the walls of this cavernous space. Even a thousand years ago, people had been worshipping there for centuries. Of course they felt like God dwelt there.

But as today's gospel reminds us, God is also present for us in the more mundane places, too. God is present in hospital waiting rooms. God is present when we're eating last night's leftovers. God is present when we're not sure how to help a friend. We don't need to escape our lives to find God, but—to use the old Jesuit phrase—we seek to find God in all things. That underneath all of our anxiety and busyness and boredom and confusion, God is there with us.

In Jesus, God is Emmanuel, closer to us than we are to ourselves.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

² Quoted in Jürgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life* (Fortress Press, 1997), 77. "Late have I loved thee, and see, thou wast within me, but I was outside and sought thee there. Thou wast beside me but I was far from thee."