



Sunday, December 31, 2023  
“Emmanuel: God With Us”  
Rev. Jess Scholten | Joshua 1:1-9

“After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses’ assistant, saying, <sup>2</sup>“My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites. <sup>3</sup>Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses. <sup>4</sup>From the wilderness and the Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, to the Great Sea in the west shall be your territory. <sup>5</sup>No one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. <sup>6</sup>Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them. <sup>7</sup>Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go. <sup>8</sup>This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful. <sup>9</sup>I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”  
- Joshua 1:1-9

Thanks be to God for this God’s holy word.

God, are you there? It’s me, Jess – just wondering if you’re around. Maybe take care of a few things for me?

That's pretty much how I thought about God for many years – available sometimes... hopefully... when you needed some extra help or you had a few prayer requests.

If we're thinking about knocking on the door of the Almighty, Scripture gives a different version in Revelation 3. Instead of us knocking on God's door, Jesus knocks on the door of our hearts, wondering if **we** are around, if **we** are willing to open the door so Jesus can come in. Of this passage, as you can see, there are some rather dated versions in Jesus kitsch.



Which is why my personal favorite of this comes in handy around Halloween – altered thriftstore art by Jason Jones, used with permission.



Recently, I started a spiritual direction certification program. Some of you are familiar with spiritual direction – it's a kind of companioning with someone who journeys with you and helps you pay closer attention to how the Holy Spirit is at work. Spiritual directors ask questions like: Where is God present in your life? Where is Jesus nudging you to action or into deeper relationship? The program I'm part of is called, "Tending the Holy," and while there were some other logistics at play, a huge part of the reason I chose this particular spiritual direction certification was because of the name: Tending the Holy. We are all called to *tend* – to nurture and care for... to pay *attention to* – God's Holy presence in our lives.

The first retreat of our two-year program was this past August, and we walked into the room with a table with lights and symbols of the spiritual life.



What struck me on this table was the open door – that entering into spiritual practices is done not out of some sort of obligation but rather out of invitation. That God's presence is an open door away – an invitation to sit with the Holy, to serve with the Holy, to live in relationship to the Holy.

As you can see, I bought my own door. It travels nicely, but usually it sits in a little corner table of my study where I sometimes hang out with God.





It's a reminder that I don't knock on God's door or hope that maybe God is listening or wonder if God is present. Instead, God is always with us. Are we present to God?

"Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?" the Psalmist asks the Lord. (Psalm 139)....

"If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast."

There is no where we can go where God is not with us.

Psalm 139 is the Romans 8 of the Old Testament – no distance, no power, no hardship or distress or persecution or even time itself – not even death can separate us from the love of God.

God reminds Joshua in our scripture passage this morning. "Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." It's the Christmas message several hundred years early: Emmanuel, Joshua, God is with you.

Admittedly, Joshua had a little bit of reason to be discouraged. After all, his mentor Moses, had just died – within eyesight of the Promised Land! Moses, the one who led the people out of Egypt, the one who had led them for forty years – or at least what

had seemed like 40 years. Joshua was still a teenager when he, his family, and the Hebrew people escaped slavery. He remembers Moses' leadership – the stories of God speaking through ordinary shrubbery, God speaking to Moses on the mountain, God's glory shining off their leader when the two of them had drawn near.

The fancy theological word for the way Moses experienced God is ***theophany*** – an experience of the Holy. It's like a close encounter of the God-kind, and Moses has many: turning aside to see what was up with a burning bush, hearing from God how to answer the requests of the people as they trudged through the wilderness – through drought and so much whining and the whole Aaron and the Golden calf thing while Moses was on the mountain with God. Through all of this, Moses is one of the characters of the Bible who is steeped so completely in God's presence. Like two old friends.

And now, as Joshua leads the people into the promised land, he does so without the help of this mentor, friend, and support. God's words of encouragement - "Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go" – must have been deeply meaningful at such a moment. The Holy opens the door before Joshua, promising God's presence every step along the way.

That's the open door.

That's the invitation that marks whatever threshold we walk across. Maybe it's what is around the corner in the coming year – it's hard not to think about that on New Year's Eve. As we launch into the new year, that symbol of the door, which is always open and always inviting us into God's presence, seems like a good one on the doorstep of what is to come in 2024. What doorways are you about to enter in the coming year?

Graduations - engagements – expecting – vacations – diagnoses – elections – question marks – birthday leveling up – chapters closing for something new to open up. It may only be one day difference on the calendar, but there's something about a whole new year stretched out before us that gives us that take-stock feeling.

It would be impossible not to mention some new starts here at Covenant – one new associate with the arrival of Pastor Megan over the summer. And soon in February, after prayerful discernment with your APNC and myself, another pastoral addition. I'm honored and humbled as we enter into serving together.

But more than these kinds of changes, Covenant faces what all congregations face – this new chapter in a dramatically changed ecclesial landscape. The church is so much different than we were almost four years ago. It's more than updated technology, it's more than hybrid worship. It's letting go of rote religiosity and instead committing wholeheartedly to something new. It's moving from the head knowledge about God to the heart knowledge of God's presence. It's a new understanding of what it means to be the kingdom of God, now – like Jesus said – the kingdom of heaven is at hand. It's a new commitment to justice and digging deep for hope and peace in the face of unrest and all out atrocities.

Our Scripture passage this morning is about a very big change that happened in the life of the people of Israel. After being rescued from slavery in Egypt, after walking through the Red Sea, after coming across bitter water and trying to figure out how to eat manna and spending forty years wandering around in the desert, they are finally on the cusp of the promised land, that land flowing with milk and honey.

In the midst of that big change, God speaks to Joshua, the one who will lead them in the next step of the journey. "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. <sup>6</sup>Be strong and courageous." God tells Joshua: I'm right here, walking with you. I won't abandon you. You don't have to knock on my door to see if I'm home – my presence is right with you.

Again and again, as the Israelites are about to make their culminating journey into the land long promised to Abraham, God reminds Joshua to be strong and courageous – not because of his skills or because the people will be faithful but because of **God's presence**.

That's some good news for us on the cusp of a new year, don't you think?

Be strong and courageous, for God is with us - a reminder we could all use these days – that God is with us, that God is present and still by our side. Because it's not only thousands of years ago that God was present, but still today as well.

This is the message of Christmas. It's as if for all of time God has reached out to humanity, trying always to be right relationship with us – in the garden, in the wilderness, through the prophets, in worship, in creation – until finally, God comes among us... as one of us... in Jesus. Emmanuel, God with us.

I polled some friends awhile back – when have you had an especially trying time and experienced God’s presence in it? I heard and read all sorts of stories of modern-day theophanies. Some people had a distinct sense of God’s presence – like a hand on their shoulder or calming presence that got them through something difficult, sometimes that they didn’t even notice in the moment, but realized in hindsight.

There were stories of signs people saw, angel visitations, of a lone flower in a field in the middle of November, all kinds of God moments. Sometimes it was a song that came into their head that got them through something. I still remember several years ago; Tom and I were talking in the car on the way to run errands about all the stress of a big transition in our lives. When we walked into the first store, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy,” was running through the speakers. It was so silly, but also so perfect for that moment.

What are your stories? The moments of overwhelming gratitude, the person who showed up at just the right time, the feeling of God’s presence in the midst of a lonely time. We are called to witness and share these stories of Holy Encounters.

They give us courage on hard days – during times we’re trying to regain balance post-pandemic. Or when it seems like no matter what we do, injustice reigns – racism and poverty and greed continue their tight grip. Reminding ourselves of God’s abiding presence helps on days when we feel like catching up on the news like we’re watching a scary movie, fingers over our eyes so just a sliver can be seen – war, violence, genocide, destruction. When days are challenging, we need even more than usual to be reminded of God’s abiding presence. May the (Emmanuel, God with us) reminders of Christmas linger with us throughout the year at whatever doorsteps we find ourselves.

Be strong and stand firm, for the Lord your God is with you. Into what doorways is God inviting you in 2024?



As you walk into a new year, be strong and courageous, for you are not alone. The Lord your God is with you. And God's door, God's invitation, is always open. Thanks be to God!

A blessing from William Sloan Coffin:

*The world is now too dangerous  
and too beautiful for anything but love.  
May your eyes be so blessed you see God in everyone.  
Your ears, so you hear the cry of the poor.  
May your hands be so blessed  
that everything you touch is a sacrament.  
Your lips, so you speak nothing but the truth with love.  
May your feet be so blessed you run  
to those who need you.  
And may your heart be so opened,  
so set on fire, that your love,  
your love, changes everything.*