

## 1 Sermon, March 6, 2011

Texts: Exodus 18:14-24, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-28

Title: "God Be With You"

1. God be with you – why does it matter
2. God be with you – the thing that matters most of all
3. Jethro & Moses
4. Psalm 23 – in the darkest valley
5. Thessalonians – as a part of vibrant faith

### 1. God be with you – why does it matter

God be with you.

It's the root meaning of the word "goodbye."

It is said in the Bible many times over in one way or another:

May God keep you. May you dwell in the palm of God's hand.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ.

Jesus said, "I will be with you always."

Yes, it is in the Bible in many places. But why would we tell someone, "May God be with you"?

Isn't God everywhere already?

How can our simple words make God any more present?

Isn't it kind of silly to wish for someone that God would be with them, when we know that God is already there?

### 2. God be with you – the thing that matters most of all

Asking that God would be with someone is a reminder to them; it's a prayer to God for blessing for the other.

But most of all, when we say, "God be with you," it is a statement of faith.

We are saying that God is with us in the good times; God is with us in the bad times.

God is with us. That's the bedrock of our faith. God may not do what we ask, but God is with us.

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That's why we don't despair when we are deeply disappointed by the day's events. When we see a world of hurt, when things don't go our way, when we're disappointed in someone, God is with us.

It is essential to communicate that message when I'm teaching Confirmation. But it is hard to make sure that message is getting through to someone with only thirteen years of experience. When your friends hurt you, when your parents disappoint you, God is still there. God's love is the only thing that lasts forever.

God with us is our first hope and our last defense.

### 3. Jethro & Moses

Think of the story of Moses and his father-in-law, Jethro that we read this morning.

Moses was working hard. He was trying to answer every complaint himself, and he was getting worn out. He needed wisdom.

His father-in-law, Jethro, gave him advice, but first said, "God be with you."

If you said, "God be with you" before giving someone advice, what would you mean by it?

Would it be a sincere wish for the other person's best efforts?

Would it be a way of saying, "I think my advice is good, but pray about it."

Would it be a way of getting the other person to slow down and pay attention?

I don't know what Jethro meant by it, but it was in the context of figuring out what to do.

When we're looking for wisdom about what to do, remembering that God is with us is important. Remembering that we can lean on God for guidance; that we can turn to the scripture and to our family of faith — that is rich and beautiful.

"God with us" means we can turn to God for guidance.

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#### 4. Psalm 23 – in the darkest valley

“God with us” can also mean that we turn to God for support, for emotional stability, for a lifeline when things are falling apart.

Psalm 23 speaks of this; it talks about the Lord being our Shepherd, and so with us to lead us and feed us and protect us. It also talks about God being with us when the chips are down in verse 4:

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff– they comfort me.

The “valley of the shadow of death” mentioned in Psalm 23 is real. Often, when someone we love dies, we experience that sense of being lost, of being lonely, of diminished meaning.

But that “dark valley” feeling is not just reserved for death. It can come when a relationship changes or ends, or when a dream is lost, or when chronic illness sets in.

We need “God with us” in the dark valleys of life.

When we are facing an addiction, and losing hope, we need to hear, “God is with you.”

When children disappoint their parents, or vice versa, we need to hear, “God is with you.”

When we hear the word “cancer” up close and personal, we need to hear, “God is with you!”

When you get that pink slip, or when a business turns sour, we need to hear, “God is with you.”

When you are with someone who has suffered a deep loss, and you lack for anything else to say, it’s always OK to say, “God is with us.” Because it’s always true.

It is true if a sick person is cured.

It is true if a sick person suffers.

It is true if a sick person dies.

God is with us.

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### 5. Thessalonians – as a part of vibrant faith

God be with you, God keep you — these are very Biblical ideas that come into our modern language. And they are true also for the joyful times. When we celebrate, when we are on top of the world, when all seems to be going well, God is with us just as much as in the sad times.

Tuesday is Mardi Gras. Mardi Gras is not an official Christian Holiday, but it has long been celebrated because it's the day before entering into Lent, a season of fasting and self-denial.

Mardi Gras in New Orleans, Carnivale in Buenos Aires — these are modern legacies of old practices. The human spirit needs to celebrate; and there is always something to celebrate — God is with us!

Listen again to the reading from Thessalonians:

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil. May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this. Beloved, pray for us. Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all of them. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you." 1 Thessalonians 5:16-28, NRSV.

This passage doesn't say "God be with you" in those exact words. What it does ask God to do is:

Make us holy

Keep us safe in body and in spirit

Keep us ready for Jesus' coming.

That sounds a lot like God being with us.

Paul also urges his audience to pray, listen to the scripture and the Holy Spirit, hug one another, spread the news, rejoice always, and give thanks for everything.

The news that God is with us should not only be a comfort in sad times, but should be something that causes joy to bubble up in us in ordinary times.

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### 6. Conclusion

The news that God is with us; the blessing of the words "God be with you," can give us comfort, direction and joy.

Is it any wonder that Emmanuel, which means "God is with us" is one of the names for Jesus? Jesus brings good news in every way.

In closing, I want to share with you a favorite passage from Romans 8:

"Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Romans 8:35-39, NRSV.

Amen.

"When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, while all the people stand around you from morning until evening?" Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God. When they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make known to them the statutes and instructions of God." Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good. You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you! You should represent the people before God, and you should bring their cases before God; teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do. You should also look for able men among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain; set such men over them as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Let them sit as judges for the people at all times; let them bring every important case to you, but decide every minor case themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. If you do this, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people will go to their home in peace." So Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he had said." Exodus 18:14-24, NRSV.