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Bible References: 2nd Corinthians 13:11-13,
Matthew 28:16-20, Psalms 8
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At the beginning of Matthew's gospel, the angel comes to Mary and says, "You will have a son and you will call his name Emmanuel," which is Hebrew for God with us. Jesus indeed is the fulfillment of that promise. He is God with us, and He underlines that with his last words on this earth before he is sent into heaven to be with his father. He said "Lo, I am with you, I am Emmanuel, God with you always." It's the most beautiful name imaginable. But, it's not just a name; it is the truth of reality about God. God is with us. When John Wesley, the founder of Methodism was on his deathbed in 1791, the last words that he uttered before he breathed his last were, "The best of all is God is with us, the best of all is God is with us." To that greatest of all academic institutions in the world, Duke University, we added a building addition to the Divinity School a couple of years ago. The main stone portal that we used to enter the recesses of the building has those words from Wesley etched in stone, "The best of all God is with us".

I love that as an image every time we pass through a portal, every time we come to a turning point in life, every time we walk down any hallway into our future. It may appear to be bright and clear to us, or it may seem utterly dark, and we're not sure how we can even manage to take our next step. The best of all is God is with us, God is with us. We may have cause to doubt, but we need not ever doubt that God is with us. When I have moments that I wonder how can God be with me even in this dark moment, I have a passage that's typed out on a piece of paper in my desk. It's from the late Archbishop Oscar Romero. On Good Friday 1979, he wrote this, "God is not failing us when we don't feel his presence. Let us not say God doesn't do what I pray for, therefore I don't pray anymore." God exists, and he exists even more the further you feel from him. God is closer to you when you think he is farther away and doesn't hear you. When you feel the anguish, desire for God to come near because you don't feel him present. Then God is very close to your anguish. When are we going to understand that God not only gives happiness, but also tests our faithfulness in moments of affliction?

It is then that prayer and religion have their most merit, when one is faithful in spite of not feeling the Lord's presence. What does it feel like? What is it like when the Lord is with us? Last night, we ventured out to see the new Narnia movie, *Prince Caspian*, based on the children's book by C.S. Lewis. Aslan, the good lion is not in the movie very much, but he has 1 line that he repeats 3 different times during the movie. He is speaking of the way he is present to help the...children when they are in need, and what he says 3 times is, the truth about how God is with us. Aslan says, "The same thing never happens twice, the same thing never happens twice." God may be with us in one way, but the next time God in God's wisdom is with us in a very different way, and over a lifetime we come to see and to understand the countless ways that God is with us. A few weeks ago, my son goes to Alexander Graham Middle School, he was confirmed last year, we took a little driving tour of the Southeastern United States. There were some places we wanted to see. I should correct that: There were some places I wanted to see that I dragged him along to, that's how that works in our family.

One of the places that we went to was Montgomery, Alabama. We saw the bus stop where Rosa Parks refused to get off the bus. We saw the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church where Martin Luther King stirred up a revolution within our country. We saw the parsonage where Dr. King lived with his wife, Coretta, and his young child, Yoki. One night in early 1957, a white Klansman rode by and tossed a bomb onto the porch of that house. King was preaching down the street. Fortunately, Coretta and Yoki were in the back of the house, they were not harmed. The bomb went off, the house was engulfed in flames. A crowd gathered outside that porch (staring), Dr. King came running and made the most remarkable speech, he said, "Don't do anything panicky, we cannot solve this through retaliation. Jesus said 'He who lives by the sword will die by the sword.' Jesus said we must love our enemies. We must meet hatred with love." How do you come to be able to give articulation to the heart of God so clearly in such a difficult moment? The only way that can happen is over a lifetime of cultivating the presence of God in your life. Then when that happens, we can never be thrown off balance.

We know that the Lord is with us, and we can respond. This was very hard for King. By the way, his home had been bombed, endangering his family. Not long after that, he was thrown in jail on trumped-up charges, everyone was giving him grief. He had not signed on for this. He wanted a comfortable, easy life and he got to the point where he could not sleep at night. One of those nights he could not sleep, he got up at 3 in the morning and gave up trying to sleep, and began to percolate a cup of coffee. He bowed his head over that cup of coffee and prayed these words, "Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I think the cause we represent is right. But Lord, I must confess, I'm weak now. I'm faltering, I'm losing my courage and I can't let people see me like this because they'll begin to get weak." At that moment, he heard a voice very clearly in his kitchen saying, "Martin, stand up for righteousness, stand up for justice, stand up for truth, and lo I will be with you, even til the end of the age." King said, "I heard the voice of Jesus saying fight on, I heard the voice of Jesus promising never to leave me alone." The best of all, God is with us.

There are 2 things about that that are remarkable and lovely, I think. One is that King found that following Christ was hard. Sometimes we think that if we're in sync with God, everything's going to be easy, everything's going to be comfortable. We'll just be giggling at every moment, it's just so delightful being in sync with God. What Jesus found, what the prophets found, what the saints through history found is that when we are in sync with God in a world that is not in sync with God, we find the going to be difficult, and that is precisely why it is meaningful. We could devise confirmation in a way that would say, "Come to one meeting for 5 minutes and at the end of that you can be confirmed." And people might think, "Hey, that's easier than what we have just done." But it's because what we have just done is hard and takes some time that it actually becomes meaningful. The second thing that's interesting is that King was in that kitchen, and he heard the very voice of God. I don't know about you, but if I was somewhere and I heard God speak to me directly, I'd say, "I'm just going to stay right here. I'm going to stay in this kitchen because this is where God spoke to me, and maybe this is where the pipeline to God is, and I want to hear God again. I'm just going to stay right here in the kitchen where it's safe and where I might hear God again."

But King did not stay in the kitchen. The next morning, he put on his coat and his tie and he went back out into the world. He tried to fight for what is right, to try to stand up for God, to try to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world. It's always a rhythm. We discover God in the kitchen of private prayer, but we never just say that we go back into the world to stand up for God in the world. We come in to worship into this place. Perhaps we have some palpable sense of the presence of God here, but that is not the end of God's presence for us. We go through that portal believing that the best of all is God is with us, and, wherever we go, God is not only with us, but God is seen to other people through us. I mentioned last week, and I'm going to underline it again, because, you folks, I'm just going to slap your wrist a little. You did not respond as generously as I hoped you would this week, so I'm going to give you another chance. You can chuckle with me, but get serious after we're done. I mentioned to you that 2 of our leaders, 2 of our pastors are leaving us, and that God has laid very special things on their hearts, and the conclusion is that it's really cool that Alisa Lasater cares about South Tryon and isn't it neat that Steve James cares about Haiti? They are our pastors. God uses them to lead us. Alisa Lasater cares about people, about people at South Tryon Community Church, and we have an opportunity to step forward and continue to make that church happen. If you're wanting to understand what it means that God is with us, then we respond to that. Because the people out there will not know that God is with us unless we, the people of God, act in ways that show that God is with us. Steve James, as I told you about last week, has trouble sleeping at night. He keeps waking up, and he thinks about the starving children that he saw recently in Haiti. Here is my question: How will those starving children in Haiti come to believe that the Lord is with us?

We could take today's sermon and have it translated into French and send it down there on a CD and play it for those children. The Lord is with you. I doubt they'd say, "Amen." I think the only way they'll believe the Lord is with us, those children in Haiti who have bloated bellies and toothpicks for arms and legs... The only way that they will believe that the Lord is with us, is if you and I act as the hands and feet of Christ and put some food in their very hungry mouths. The Lord is with us. There are a holy host of people in this world who will never believe it until we, the people of God, act and show what the presence of God in this world is like.

Jesus last words were "Lo, I am with you always". John Wesley's last words were, "The best of all is the Lord is with us, God is with us", and we discover that here. We take it into the world. We discover it in private prayer. We take it back out into the world. It's that rhythm. The world. Prayer. The world. For teenagers being confirmed, for parents, for all of us in this room, thanks be to God.