

“You Are Not Alone”
Advent 4: Love
20 Dec 2020

Discussion Questions

Read Isaiah 7.10-17 and Matthew 1.18-25.

Save 5-10 minutes at the end for the final question/practice.

1. What’s the connection between being-with and love? There’s certainly a lot to think about in our present context, with a pandemic that is denying us the capacity to be with one another in so many different ways. What counts as “with”; what makes us “apart”? Is physical presence important? Why?

The goal here is to explore our experience of “with-ness”—what makes it, what makes it good, bad, not enough (too much?). Get people to meditate on why love requires being with.

2. Through the Word given to the prophet, God names himself Immanuel, “God-with-us”—a name that Matthew’s Gospel tells us applies to Jesus, centuries after Isaiah. Jesus taking on flesh is clearly a fulfillment of God-with-us—but it’s not the only instance. Where else in Scripture do we see God-with-us (whoever the “us” might be)? What does that “with-ness” look like? How is it similar/different from the with-ness of Jesus?

Some possible examples: God with... Adam and Eve in the Garden. Hagar in the desert. The Israelites in the wilderness, as smoke and fire. The Israelites coming into Canaan, being “with” them in battle. Revelation 21: God with his people eternally. Others?

3. Read John 14.1-21. The sermon suggests that God-with-us is both a future promise, in Jesus’ second advent, and a present reality, in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. How are they related? How does the Spirit being in us make Jesus present to us?

See John 14.26 in addition to the reading. The Holy Spirit as teacher and the one who brings remembrance of Christ’s teachings. John 15.26: Holy Spirit bears witness about Jesus.

4. According to John 14, those who believe in Jesus are spiritually “in” him (see also Colossians 3.3) and he is in the Father—and Jesus is “in” us, along with the Spirit and the Father. What do you make of this? How can God and a human person mutually contain each other?

No right answer here...I wanted to see what people came up with!

5. Is God-with-us conditional on our actions/thoughts/feelings? Can we drive God away? It is undeniable that all of us sometimes feel far from God—if God is with us, what’s happening in those moments (or seasons) of perceived distance? The sermon suggests that we might feel distant from God or forget God’s indwelling presence because of sin in our lives, neglect of spiritual concerns, and/or external forces of lovelessness that could lead us to despair. Do any of these ring true for you? Where do you find consolation?

A pastoral note for leaders. People need to be able to take responsibility for ways that they’ve run from God through sin and neglect. They also need to know that someone not feeling God isn’t necessarily their fault. There are situations that have deprived people of a sense of God’s love, through no fault of their own. Try to hold this tension and balance things out if they’re tipping in one way or the other.

6. Given that you carry the Trinity in your body, can you be Immanuel to someone else? What would that look like?

Consider 2 Corinthians 5.11-21 as a possible reference, but this is really an open-ended question to invite consideration of bearing God to and for one another. And also to consider how when we treat others poorly, we are denying them an experience of God with them.

Concluding practice. Read Psalm 139.1-18 as a group, slowly, with each person taking a verse in turn. Don’t discuss it. When you’re done, sit in quiet reflection. It’ll feel less awkward if you close your eyes; assuming you’re meeting via Zoom, feel free to turn off your cameras if you like. Let the leader bring you back after a few minutes, and conclude.