



# THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

## Dakotas-Minnesota Area

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## The In-Person God: Christmas sermon from Bishop Bruce R. Ough

**Isaiah 9: 2-7**

**Luke 2: 1-20**

**Hebrews 1: 1-3a**

The prophet Isaiah got it right: “A child is born to us, a son is given to us, and authority will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).

Grace and peace to you and your household as we gather in living and family rooms, or in small, intimate watch parties to celebrate the most holy day of the year—the birth of Jesus, Emmanuel—God with us.

We are in a prolonged season of disruption, frustration, surprise, disorientation, and interruption of our way of life and our personal lives. The surging coronavirus pandemic and the resulting economic dislocation have interrupted everything. The political divisiveness of the recent election and the renewed cries for racial justice have been disruptive and disorienting. We are surprised by how rapidly and how well we have adapted to new behaviors, including online worship and work. Yet, we grieve the loss of the familiar and, in all too many cases, the loss of loved ones.

This season of disruption and disorientation causes me to remember that Christmas is above all else a story of interruption. The details of the Christmas story are now so familiar to us that we can't imagine what an unexpected intrusion the angels and the baby Jesus and strange, curious shepherds were for Mary and Joseph.

Imagine how interrupted Mary's life was when the angel Gabriel appeared to her and told her she would bear God's son. Imagine the disruption in Joseph's life when he learned his fiancé, Mary, was pregnant. The angel urged Joseph not to fear. But how could Joseph not fear when his whole world had been rocked? When is the last time an angel appeared in one of your dreams without it disorienting you?



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Imagine the disruption of traveling by foot and donkey to enroll for tax payments when nine months' pregnant. Imagine the frustration of finding no place to deliver the baby. Imagine the surprise of having three kings bearing expensive gifts coming to worship your baby. Imagine the interruption of fleeing to Egypt to escape the hatred of King Herod.

And, we think our lives have been interrupted and turned upside-down! Christmas is all about disruption and disorientation. That is the way God is. God's intrusions into our lives causes consternation, interruption, surprise. When God is with us—Emmanuel—God is not with us in placid, non-disruptive ways. When God is with us, it surprises us; it interrupts us; it disorients us; it stretches our imaginations; it opens our hearts.

And, why does God go to such great lengths to interrupt our lives? Why did God send his only son as a fragile baby into a cold, cruel world? Why? Friends, here is the answer to this perplexing question: to create the kind and size of interruption that would cause us to finally hear, "I love you. You are my beloved."

Our growing use and dependence on technology has been accelerated by the coronavirus pandemic, but our reliance on electronic communication is not new. For example, online dating services have been with us for over 20 years now. These services have interrupted—forever changed—the way millions of people seek to find the love of their life.

How many of you viewing this Christmas service have tried an online dating service? Go on: Raise those hands or say "yes" if you won't embarrass yourself with the people you are with.

It's my understanding that the first step in online dating is for individuals to connect in a chat room by writing messages on their computer screens. I have read that experienced online dating service users know within five minutes whether the other person qualifies as potential soulmate material. But chatting is not the end. Couples who discover compatibility next "go to voice." That is, they resort to old-fashioned methods and have a telephone conversation. If that goes well, the potential mates set up an actual in-person meeting in real space instead of cyberspace. In chat room-speak, their third step is called face-to-face. Please keep in mind I know this process only by reading about it, not from personal experience. I found my soulmate, Char, through more conventional means, but no less surprising and disruptive to the trajectory of my life up to that point.

These electronic meeting rituals have a certain analogy with the love affair that God has been carrying on with us, his beloved people. Think about it! When God was looking for a way to say, "I love you" to the world, he went first to writing, then to voice, and finally he met us face-to-face. First God tried hard copy—The Ten Commandments written on stone tablets. God gave the laws to the people of Israel because he loved them with tremendous passion. The hard copy commandments are a powerful and passionate love letter from the one true God who



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brought his people out of the land of Egypt—out of the house of slavery. Unfortunately, God’s people rejected him in ancient times and today.

But God still loves the world; God still loves you and me. So, in pursuit of his beloved people, God went to step two—voice. God spoke in a clear voice, a clarion voice, a powerful voice, a prophetic voice. But what did the people do to the prophets, to those voices encouraging repentance and righteousness? They ignored them. They berated them; they beat them. They killed them. The great city of Jerusalem gained the reputation as “the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it” (Matthew 23: 37).

Finally—finally—God goes to an in-person encounter. In the letter to the Hebrews, we are told that, “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets. But in these last days, God spoke to us by a son” (Hebrews 1: 1-2).

God goes from hard-copy commandments, to the voice of prophets, to the in-person encounter of Jesus—God incarnate.

This is an in-person encounter announced by an angel named Gabriel. This is an in-person encounter accepted by Mary. This is an in-person encounter given birth in a stable. This is an in-person encounter proclaimed by a multitude of angels and witnessed by a group of nobody shepherds. This is an in-person encounter accented by a star in the East that brought three kings to their knees.

You see—God will never let his beloved people get away from God. God will never let you get away. Even as we remember and celebrate God’s very first in-person encounter that took place in a Bethlehem stable over 2000 years ago, God is seeking an in-person encounter with each of us—with you—this very day, this Holy Night, this Holy Day. Even as we practice social distancing to help suppress the spread of COVID-19, God continues to come to us in-person. Again, this Christmas, God is speaking to you. Listen to what God is saying: “You are my child. I love you. I am here with you.”

Years ago, the *New York Times* carried a story about a terrible accident that happened to a little 4-year-old girl named Sarah. The accident happened back in the days when work crews marked construction sites by putting out smudge pots with open flames. Sarah got too close to one of the smudge pots and her pants caught fire and she was severely burned. The scars running the length and circumference of Sarah’s legs looked like a jigsaw puzzle. In the third grade she was asked, “If you could have one wish, what would it be?” Sarah wrote, “I want everyone to have legs like mine.” Listen again: “I want everyone to have legs like mine.” Sarah did not write “I want legs like everyone else.” Sarah’s response is what drew me to her story. It is a powerful illustration of God with us.



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When we suffer pain, when our hearts are broken, when life has defeated us, when sin has a grip on us, when we need a second chance, we want others to understand. We want others to know our experience—to identify with us. We want everyone to have legs like ours. We don't want to be alone.

Friends, this is exactly why God comes to us in-person, face-to-face. God understands. God identifies with our broken hearts, our anxious hearts, our hopeful hearts, our yearning hearts. That is why God came to us in human form—in Jesus. Jesus comes to us in-person so God can know and experience our temptations and our deepest hurts and hungers. Jesus comes to us in-person so God can know a parent's deepest pain when a child goes astray or a marriage falls apart. Jesus comes to us in-person so God can experience our grief when a loved one dies.

Jesus makes it possible for God and you to meet face-to-face. Jesus makes it possible for God and you to be in-person, even in the midst of online worship. There is nothing vague or ambiguous about this human love letter from God. The proof of God's amazing love is in the manger. God appeared in flesh and blood—in a concrete, human body connected to a particular time, a particular place, a particular mother, a particular name, a particular mission. And now God comes, through the Spirit of the Risen Christ, to your particular life circumstance; your particular time and place; your particular living or family room; your particular disrupted, disorienting, virtual world.

This is the marvelous gift of Christmas. Jesus comes to us in-person to take on our pain, our suffering, our sin. Jesus comes to us in-person to save us from our fears, our anxiety, our compulsions. Jesus comes to us in-person to give us a second chance. Jesus comes to us in-person to grant us grace and peace, and abundant life. Jesus makes it possible for God to tell you God loves you for who you are. Jesus gives you an in-person encounter with unconditional, unmerited love. Jesus brings you face-to-face with the only One who can teach you how to love yourself and others with complete joyful abandon.

May God grant you and your family the most important, the most extravagant, the most precious gift of Christmas this year: an in-person encounter with Jesus—Emmanuel, God with you. Amen and Amen!

Merry Christmas and a blessed, Happy New Year.

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