

## ***Jumping Into the Story of Emmanuel: God With Us***

Based on Daniel 3:1-27, Psalm 23, and John 10:1-18

A Message Offered by Toby Jones to the People of ChxUCC on February 15, 2026

For those of us who are pastors, one of the situations we encounter most is the suffering of those we love – people in our churches, people in our neighborhoods, even people in our own families. And the most consistent thing about the suffering we pastors see and bear witness to is that the people suffering all want the same thing: they want their suffering to be end. They want to be rescued out of their suffering. ‘Take my cancer away, Lord...’ ‘Take my pain away, Lord...’ ‘Heal my child’s addiction, Lord...’ ‘Make the bombing stop, Lord...’

As people of faith, we want a rescuing God. We want our God to swoop in and lift us out of our troubles. That’s the ending we want for our stories of suffering and hardship, and it’s understandable that we would want such a rescue when we are suffering, given all that we learned in Sunday school – all those stories of God miraculously freeing the Hebrews from Pharaoh by parting the waters of the Red Sea, and of Joshua - with his tiny army - defeating the mighty warriors of Jericho simply by marching around the walls of the city 7 times. So, when we – or someone we love - enters a time of suffering or hardship, we can’t help but hope for a rescue...to be removed or lifted out of it.

But my 40+ years of experience caring for *faithful* people who are suffering has shown me that 99% of the time we DON’T get rescued out of our suffering. Instead, we simply have to move through it. When the cancer diagnosis comes, we gird our loins, buckle up our chin strap, and plow thru chemo and radiation. We join hands with our family and loved ones and move forward through the storm, surrounded by the presence of a God we call “Emmanuel” for a reason... because He IS *with us*. When we lose a loved one – a parent, a spouse, a dear friend, or, God forbid, a child, we don’t get rescued out of that. The loved one we’ve lost doesn’t miraculously come back to us. We grieve; we mourn; we hold on tightly to our loved ones; and we cry out to Emmanuel – God with us.

The truth is, even in the scriptures - in the vast majority of cases - faithful people don’t get airlifted out of their suffering and hardship. They move through it as best they can, leaning on the presence of God – Emmanuel. Look at our

passages for the morning. In Daniel 3, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are arrested for refusing to bow down to the giant golden statue of Nebuchadnezzar. Their punishment, according to the king's decree, was to be thrown into a fiery furnace and burned to death.

Now, what I find both fascinating and instructive, as I look at this story, is that God did not airlift these 3 faithful men out of that furnace. Did you notice that? What God did instead was join them IN the furnace...Emmanuel...God with us. The story would have been so different if old Nebuchadnezzar had peered into that furnace window and witnessed the sudden disappearance of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. But that's not what happened. What the king saw was those same three, odd-named fellows, still in that fiery furnace...but with a mysterious fourth person in there with them.

This is Yahweh; this is the great I Am; this is Emmanuel. Do you have any idea how many times God says to people in the scriptures, "I will be with you"? He says it to Moses in Exodus 3 when he sends him to Pharaoh. God has Jeremiah say it over and over again. Isaiah says it repeatedly too. Jesus says it. "I will be with you" is one of the most common refrains in all of the biblical library.

Our second reading this morning was one that most of us have memorized – the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul...Yea, though I walk through valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil," and why? "For thou art WITH Me...For thou art WITH ME!" The promise we have from God is NOT a promise of rescue or removal from difficulty. It's a promise of presence. It's the promise of Emmanuel, which means "God is WITH us."

So many followers of Jesus have misunderstood this Emmanuel truth. Countless suffering Christ-followers are still waiting for divine helicopters to airlift them out of all their suffering and difficulty. But the way I read the scriptures – AND the way I read my own pastoral experience - it's NOT divine helicopters we should be looking for; it's parachuters. Our God is not an airlifter; She's a paratrooper. Emmanuel...God with us. I think this is what Jesus was after in John 10, when he called upon that shepherd image of Psalm 23. "The Lord is my shepherd..." A shepherd has one role – to be with and stay with the sheep. A

shepherd may not always be able to rescue his sheep. But he darn sure will never abandon them. When wolves and other predators come; when storms and horrible weather come; when thieves and robbers come...the shepherd abides, stays with, never leaves the sheep. And Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.

You'll notice that a shepherd is not an airlifter in the way Jesus talks about it. He puts himself in harm's way. He stands between the thief or the wolf and bears the pain with and for them. He lays down his life for the sheep. He climbs into the fiery furnace. This is Emmanuel; this is God with us. God comes to be with us and stay with us, come what may, no matter what enemies assault us; no matter what suffering befalls us; no matter what.

Folks, we all suffer in our lives somehow. We all face pain, grief, hardship, and hard things we aren't sure we can make it through. Don't make such times worse by expecting God to take your suffering away. He didn't take Jesus's suffering away. He didn't take Paul's "thorn in his flesh" away, though Paul begged God to take it away three different times. And we think we should be different?

The story we are invited to jump into is not a story where we are removed from or rescued from suffering. Jesus was very plain about this when he said, "In this world you WILL have trouble." He also said, "If any of you would come after me – would jump into this story with me – you, too, are going to have to take up your cross as well." The story we are invited to jump into is the story of Emmanuel...the story of the good shepherd who will be with us in all that we go through every step of the way.

A while back, I lost someone who was incredibly dear to me. It was sudden, unexpected, and devastating. I was at a total loss. I couldn't sleep, couldn't eat, and just wanted this awful, excruciating situation to go away. I wanted an airlift, a rescue, for things to be restored to how they were before this. But through the support and wisdom of a highly effective counselor and a few trusted friends, it became clear that there would be no airlift for me, no rescue, no mitigating of the pain. And so, my focus gradually shifted. I began to beg God for Her presence, that I might be able to feel her close to me. At night, when I couldn't sleep, I'd sing that little snippet from "Away in a Manger" – "Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask you to stay,

close by me forever, and love me, I pray.” I turned to John 15 and just read, over and over, “I am the vine and you are the branches. Apart from me you can do nothing.” I even wrote my own prayer based upon it, that says: Jesus, be my vine at night, when I lay down alone and weep for what I no longer have, when the night smothers me in darkness and sleep won’t come... Jesus be my vine in the morning, when I just want to stay in bed, when I see no hope in rising and have so little to look forward to... Jesus be my vine in the afternoon, when fatigue sets in and the prospect of another dinner alone brings despair and a big house swallows me in its silence.”

I turned my attention away from rescue out of my suffering and turned toward a renewed focus on God’s promised presence. I stopped looking for that helicopter and instead looked for a paratrooper...a shepherd...that mysterious presence who would join me in my furnace. This is what I’ve come to understand is required of us when suffering comes to call. This is how we jump into the story of Jesus when we are suffering.

But there’s another part of the story of suffering that God is hoping we’ll jump into. It’s what we get to do when *other* people around us are suffering. The gospel invites us to jump into the furnace of their suffering with them. That’s what the people of Minneapolis did for their immigrant neighbors, right? They came out of their homes with cameras and whistles to stand in the furnace with the immigrants who were under siege. It’s the same thing we do when a friend is in the hospital or going to a chemo treatment. We go with them, as a physical, human reminder of a divine truth: that they are not alone, that the Good Shepherd IS with them even in the valley of the shadow of death. May we jump into their story of suffering with them, knowing it is what Jesus would do.

Folks, there is a lot of suffering in the story of Jesus, just as there is a lot of suffering in our story and in the story of our world. Don’t sit around waiting for God to rescue you out of it. Instead keep your eyes peeled for all the surprising and grace-filled ways God enters into your suffering with you. And be equally on the lookout for ways you can enter into the suffering of others in his name, bearing witness to God’s goodness and presence by means of your goodness and presence. That’s jumping into the story of Jesus and his love. Amen.