

I am with you...

Peter JB Carman

Emmanuel Friedens Church, Schenectady New York

Readings: Genesis 1:1-5

Matthew 28:16-20

I.

It was good yesterday to stand in the midst of a great crowd of humans, a great cloud of witnesses, in the middle of Albany New York, and to walk with a good little group of Emmanuel Friedens members, giving witness to welcome and affirmation, to a fundamental openness to all people: gay people and straight; male and female; and sorting it out. I was glad that Larry and Faye Philips joined us for the walk. We were also joined briefly at the beginning by my wife and partner Lynn, and yes, even our not-so-little dog Seneca. Some of you asked me what kind of a dog she is—that’s an excellent question, and it takes a little while to answer, since it is an open question.

It was good to be together with a great cross-section of humanity yesterday, as we celebrated in the Pride procession. As we gathered together to prepare to walk, this little phrase from Matthew’s gospel kept repeating itself in my mind: “*I am with you...*” It is from the final words of the risen Jesus to his disciples and friends, in Matthew’s gospel.

Now this phrase is a part of what we minister types call the “Great Commission.” While it is an often repeated passage at denominational conventions, we tend to jump over “I am with you”, looking at other phrases like “Go make disciples,” or on this Trinity Sunday, the apparently Trinitarian words like “the Father and the Son and Holy Spirit.” This week however, I got stuck on “I am with you...” So yesterday in Albany, it had been haunting me already for quite awhile. And as we got underway and we walked through crowds of people on the sidelines, I looked around. I looked around and I saw young people and old, European descent and African descent, and Asian, and yes, even one man in a Karen tribal shirt from Burma watching us with his grandson--. I ran over and shook his hand. Then as we walked through the crowd on one corner a young woman called out as she saw us walk by an obvious church group; “God is good, all the time.”

And again the words came back—*I am with you.*

It is not just that we believe these words—it is more than belief. It’s about trust. I am with you! It’s even more than trust. It’s the basis of how we try to live our lives: there is One among us, around us, within us, beneath us, greater than we are. This Being is the source of goodness; this Being loves us; this Being walks with us; this Being never leaves us alone. God is good... when? All the time. In every place and time. And so wherever we walk, whether through the streets of Albany or Beijing, in the halls of power of Washington or the city offices of Schenectady, the soccer stadiums of Rio De Janiero, the commencement stage of Union college, the back streets of Bombay, or the favelas of Recife—in every time and place a voice says “I am

with you.” Sometimes it shouts aloud! Sometimes it whispers. Sometimes it is the sound of sheer silence. And this voice, these words, this conviction makes all the difference. We are not alone.

Around some ancient fire, back at the dawn of memory, someone long ago spoke about what it means to be creatures made by One who is with us always. Before the words of Genesis were written, someone spoke them—we have no real idea who! So we are free to imagine. Imagine a grandmother sitting by firelight, speaking to little ones and big ones, and telling a story, imagining a time even before creation. Can you see the fire reflect in her eyes? Can you hear her across the centuries—listen carefully! She is saying something like this: something like this: *“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void—tohu vobohu- and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light...”*

The God called “I AM” was with creation before there was a humanity, before the dirt was separated from the water, before the stars were hung in the sky. I AM was with us, before we were. Before there was a tree in the forest, there was I AM. Before the priests and the teachers started disagreeing about the names and nature of God, I AM was. And I AM is with us, now and to the end of days.

II.

So...there is a basic question we don't want to avoid today. Not everyone in the Universe of course takes this “I am with you” notion for granted. Not everyone is convinced that we live in the holy presence—the presence of Power for Good-- all the time. Not everyone is convinced that the Wind of God still sweeps over the waters, or that the kind of love and Justice, the deep healing and profound presence which Jesus was all about—in life, and in death and in the resurrected present—is even real.

In fact let's be truthful. All of us have days of doubt. All of us have days when we wonder whether we aren't actually alone in the cosmos, fundamentally alone. Now, this is a struggle, and this struggle isn't just some abstract wrestling with the question of whether there is a God, whether God exists.

On Friday night I gathered here in the chapel with a dozen or so new friends to remember the life of a man named N____. His friends and his ex-wife and his daughter were honest as they remembered N____'s struggles—and they were honest about their own. Some days, we all confessed, we have trouble trusting any kind of higher power. Some days we have trouble, and we live as though we were alone. We run from the joy. We run from the peace. We fall back into patterns of despair. But today I want to take my cue from N____—because he kept wrestling, kept struggling, kept coming back...back into the Presence, back to the great I AM. Back to the conviction and the presumption that there is One with us whom we can trust, who undergirds and sustains, and compels us to lives of love.

One day, back in the earliest days of Christianity, when Jesus' friends encountered the living resurrected Christ, they heard him say these simple words again: "I am with you."

It was a tough time. There was only a handful of them left, and they were surrounded by a world of hurt and doubt, a world of oppression and suffering and estrangement. They needed the encouragement—and they also needed the reminder that they were called to a different way, invited to a path of resistance to power misused, summoned to a path of forgiveness for enemies and friends alike, challenged to walk a path of hope for humanity. A path of hope for the healing of creation!

Like those early disciples, you and I face a sometimes difficult path. The truths we take almost for granted, that are the basis of our lives together, are not shared by everyone. Like those earliest companions of Christ, we need to be encouraged, called, invited, and challenged to walk this path—this Jesus path of love and redemption. It starts with presence.

III.

In the past week, Emmanuel Friedens church, in one short week, I have seen you be present many times. I watched Malinda and Phil be present in giving testimony to the City Council questioning the wisdom of a gambling joint as the basis for economic recovery in this lovely little city. I felt the presence of the rest of you there who were simply...present. And then this week I have seen Dave and Maria be present as the grieving friends of a man who knew this church better than you knew him gathered to remember. And then again, I have seen many of you be present—in the name of the great I AM, led by four of our young people carrying a banner out of the Washington Park- two girls and two boys. I have seen you be present this morning—to one another-- and with your open doors, to any who would be part of this worshipping congregation.

Being present—as followers of Christ—isn't just what we do but how we do it. It isn't just saying "Welcome," but also the spirit of how we say it. It isn't just saying "No" to a bad idea for city planning, but how we say "Yes" at the same time to the good people who have that idea. This week, some of you have taught the rest of us something more of how to be present, in the name of I AM.

I am with you—says the God who made the trees and the sunset, the river and the moon. *I am with you* says the son of God who was willing to sacrifice life itself, for the sake of his great love for each of us. *I am with you* says the Wind as she blows gently and turbulently across the still to be created, still unformed future of this congregation and this city.

"Now, hear a new thing I will do,"
said God, so long ago.
"I'll let the rivers of my love
into the desert flow.
The deaf shall hear, the mourners laugh,
the prisoner sing new songs.

I'll bring you round from distant lands:
for this my spirit longs."

"Through the deep sea I'll carve a path,
where armies shall lie down."
Thus speaks the God of shattered swords,
Who stills the battle sound.
"Do not recall your ways of old,
nor turn to Babylon,
But turn instead to love your God--
redemption is begun."

"I am your God, the Holy One,
from Pharaoh all I saved.
I'll break through every iron bar
that keeps each one enslaved."
A new creation is begun,
now fade you captive past;
Lord, lead the way through wilderness,
our hearts renew at last!

We see the new thing You have done;
let hearts and hands confess
The streams of hope our God does pour
upon the wilderness!
Let all creation rise to sing thanks to the living God;
Let Justice be our sweet refrain
and Love God's final word.