

# God With Us

## Eden Jersak

I feel privileged to have grown up in a Mennonite family. This Christmas marks 70 years since my father (Jacob) came to Canada from the Ukraine as a refugee (in 1947), at the tender age of 13, accompanied by his mother (Maria), his grandmother (Elizabeth), and his older sister (Irma) and brother (Ernest).

As a young child I overheard stories of my grandfather (Opa) not coming home from work one day. He'd been taken by the Communists and held in an internment camp as an enemy of the state, along with many other Mennonite men in his German speaking village.

I listened quietly as my grandmother (Oma) told the



Maria Wiebe (Oma) with Ernest, Jacob & Irma

story of trying to see her husband as Christmas 1937 approached, hoping desperately to pass on a bit of news to him. A neighbor, who was able to smuggle letters to the prisoners, passed a note from Maria to Jacob, and in return she received a message that consisted of two letters, "FW"—*Frohe Weihnachten*, Merry Christmas. Oma was just 31-years-old when she was left with three young children and her invalid mother.

I would try not to move when she told these stories, for fear I might be asked to leave. I knew I was listening to something sacred, and I was always interested in hearing more. The stories continued: stories of paralyzing fear, surprising plot turns and amazing redemption.

### THE MENNONITES: PEOPLE, FAITH & CULTURE

The **Mennonites** are more than a Christian denomination (like Lutherans or Baptists). Mennonites are a people group, like the Jews or Romani, with a heritage of persecution, wandering, colonies and cultural markers, such as specific names, foods, dress and even language (*Plautdietsch*). Oma's story is part of that long heritage.

Their spiritual roots go back to a cluster of early 16th century Dutch, Swiss and German movements labeled "the Radicals" or "**Anabaptists.**" The Anabaptists sought a third way beyond Catholicism or Protestantism, emphasizing the Jesus Way of

discipleship, peacemaking and the priesthood of all believers. For this reason, they were martyred en masse until **Menno Simons** (a former priest) gathered the remnants and led them East in search of peace.

**Persecution** and repeated relocation made them insular (because of language, culture and outcast status), so they worked and worshipped together in communities and sometimes formed colonies.

**Eden Jersak's** family were German-speaking Anabaptists originally from Holland who moved to Germany, Prussia, then to the Ukraine as guests of the Tsarina **Catherine the Great**. In 1763, she gave each family 165 acres of farmland and issued an edict

declaring them completely free "for all time."

However, after the **Russian Revolution** (1917) and through to World War II, waves of Mennonite immigrants fled Europe to settle in the US, Canada, Mexico and Paraguay.

Mennonite settlers established congregations and faithfully practiced the Jesus Way, attracting non-ethnic Mennonites into their fellowships. Others drifted into Christ-less religion (traditionalism and legalism). Still others have abandoned Christian faith altogether, but would still identify with their Mennonite cultural heritage. □

Oma realized that she would have to take her children and mother, and flee the Ukraine. So in 1943, they boarded a train and headed for Nazi-occupied Poland. There they were housed in a village by a kind woman whose husband was fighting in the resistance movement. The woman really had no choice in housing them—it was dictated to her—but she was kind to them nonetheless.

In January of 1944, the village was given a warning to evacuate

in his car and asked what on earth they were still doing in the village, because everyone should have already evacuated.

My Oma explained the situation and the officer mentioned there were a few trucks being repaired in the village and that one of them would pick them up shortly. A few hours later, they were on their way in the back of an army truck, sitting on cold gas cans in the dead of winter.

They had not traveled far—the

right as a little girl: these stories were sacred, they held a weight to them, and were significant to Oma's faith and to mine.

We all have life stories about our journeys and our loved ones. As we struggle to find meaning in these events, I offer four passages—a progression that allows us to see a bigger picture than when we "cherry-pick" just one verse or passage to prove a point.

We'll see a trajectory—a learning curve—that starts with the Israelites in the desert, touches down in the Psalms, meets the woman at the well, and finally concludes in Romans.

I share these thoughts because it's what I'm living right now! For me, this is not a theory or an ideology—this is the kind of truth we can stand on—solid and firm. I pray it will help readers rise above whatever life throws you!

### Wrong Question

In Exodus 17:1-7, we find the Israelites in the desert. They are thirsty—whining and complaining—and wishing they were

back in Egypt as slaves to a tyrant! They grumble to Moses and ask a dangerous question—*"Is God here with us or not?"*

The reason it's a dangerous question is that it allows circumstances to dictate whether God is with you. We all know life happens—situations creep into our lives that might make us wonder if God has left the building. But it's the wrong

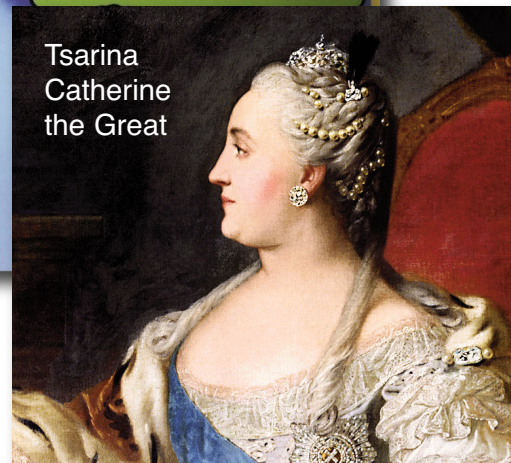


as the Germans were retreating from the advancing Russians. Convoys of trucks and vehicles drove through the village, stopping to pick up the fleeing villagers, but no one stopped for my father's family. Elizabeth was an invalid and unable to walk, and as the village emptied out, the five of them were left behind. As my Oma looked around, she raised her arms and called out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken us?"

Shortly after her desperate plea, a German officer pulled up

next city was only six miles away—but as they approached the city, it became clear that it had been bombed and utterly destroyed only hours before. And many of the people who had fled their village before they had been caught in that attack and were now dead.

Oma eventually got her mother and children to Canada, after many more trials and "God stories" along the way. I was



question. Spending too much time giving it attention will likely send you into a spiral.

## Where It Leads

Psalms 95 provides an example. It references the same event in Exodus 17, and it presents the serious problem this question precipitates. Starting in verse 7, the Psalmist thinks of Exodus 17 as “the Bitter Spring Uprising.” You can hear the frustration in the author’s pen—is he speaking for Moses or for God himself? Either way, the frustration is palpable!

The frustration is about their long history of amazing God-stories—everything from plagues to seas dividing to food falling from the sky. Apparently this wasn’t enough—they want a Slurpee on a hot day—they want water, *now!* Suddenly they are sure: God has left them!

The final verse of the Psalm makes clear what is a stake. “They’ll never get where they’re headed, never be able to sit down and rest” (Psalm 95:11, *The Message*).

Egypt is not actually very far from Israel—just 423 kms (263 miles) if you take the long way home. The journey should have taken about 40 days—not 40 years! They couldn’t get where they were headed because they didn’t understand that God was with them ALL the time—even when circumstances seemed otherwise. When we forget our history with God—the times when his presence was evident to us—and instead get distracted by the wind and the waves—we

sink, we spiral, and we lose heart.

The dangerous consequence of forgetting God’s faithfulness to us is that we don’t get where we’re going—we never get to sit down and rest. The torment of believing God has left us derails us and leaves us without peace. Personally, I can’t afford to lose either my way or my peace.



“The Woman at the Well” - Diego Rivera

## What Jesus provided

In the Gospel of John, chapter 4, we meet a woman who finds herself chatting with Jesus at a well. He knows far more about her than she has offered, and she begins to see he is no ordinary man. Again, the topic is water and thirst—at least on the surface—and Jesus starts in about God’s goodness: “If you knew the generosity of God—” Jesus points to God’s record, God’s history, God’s faithfulness—God’s ability to meet needs on an even deeper

level than we’d dare ask.

The Israelites were thirsty in the desert—and this woman is thirsty too—but H<sub>2</sub>O is not what is going to meet the need! That’s why Jesus says to her, “I am HE. You don’t have to wait any longer or look any further” (verse 26, *The Message*). Let’s remember: the Saviour was to be called,

“Emmanuel”—God with us! Here is Jesus’ declaration: God is generous—look at his track record—and here I AM—*still* with you!

This revelation of “God with us” ignited an awakening in what Jews considered an inferior version of faith—it surprised the disciples.

In the midst of this story, Jesus says something startling: “But the time is coming—it has, in fact, come—when what you’re called will not matter and where you go to worship will not matter. It’s who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit

of truth. That’s the kind of people the Father is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly themselves before him in their worship. God is sheer being itself—Spirit. Those who worship him must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration” (John 4:23-24, *The Message*).

Now that is a red letter quote from Jesus! I’m going to let that hang there because I certainly can’t unpack all it means! But here is *one simple takeaway—*

**don't judge others because of where they live, what language they speak, or the name they have given God.** Apparently that isn't a big deal to God—he's interested in us on a much deeper level.

## The Answer

Finally we come to Romans 5, where we see where we should be heading—the trajectory of living in the understanding that God is with us, regardless of any circumstances that would try to dictate otherwise.

“We throw open our doors to God—” (verse 2). In other words, **we quit asking the wrong question!** We let go of questioning if God has left us. We ask God to open our eyes, recognizing that he is with us—that we desire to see him here too!

Paul continues, “We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that he has already thrown open his door to us.” Knock and the door will be opened, seek and you will find—look and you will behold that he is right beside you, never having left you or forsaken you!

And then we see where we will stand. Verse 2 continues, “We find ourselves standing where we always hoped we might stand—out in the wide open spaces of God's grace and glory, standing tall and shouting praise.”

That's a glorious destination—a place where there's space for you to be your truest self—to have plenty of perspective over circumstances—a place to ride the waves instead of being

swallowed by them—a place to curl up with Jesus instead of wondering where he's gone.

There's more—and I want you to take all of this in!

*“There's more to come: We continue to shout our praise even when we're hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. In alert expectancy such as this, we're never left feeling shortchanged. Quite the contrary—we can't round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into or lives through the Holy*



EDEN JERSAK WITH BLESSING  
IN SOUTH AFRICA

*Spirit” (Romans 5:3-5, The Message).*

And there we have it: when we remember God's faithfulness and generosity throughout our lives—when we tell the stories and re-live the moments of our glimpses into the wonder of God's presence in our day-to-day lives—we realize he is undeterred by circumstances life throws at us! We will let go of wondering if God is with us or not. He will remind us of the ways he has

shown his presence in our lives. And we will open our doors only to find that he has already opened up his doors to us.

## Blessing

My husband Brad and I went to South Africa in February to visit friends. During that time, I received an invitation to give a message when we returned back home.

It's been a few years since I've preached, and I have seldom missed it! My first reaction was a groan, and then the old tape began to play in my head. “Nobody wants to listen to you. You no longer have a voice. Better just be quiet!”

One day, we took a trip an hour up the road. We stopped for lunch at a restaurant I'd describe as rustic at best—open walls, a tented roof, an open-pit fire with heavy pots, boiling something I wasn't sure I wanted to know about. I thought to myself, “Well girl—you are in Africa!”

We sat on lumpy chairs and swatted flies while perusing the menu. A young African woman served us drinks, helped with the

menu and finally took our order. I began to respond to a question she asked when mid-sentence, she interrupted me and said, “I love your voice! I could listen to it all day long! You should be on the radio—I would put it on and listen all afternoon.”

This is my “God story”—God coming close to me. Even as I was tentatively opening my door to him, he had already

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## Waiting for God to Act by Brian Zahnd

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who were the professional experts in prophetic scripture.

Instead it was pagan stargazers and peasant shepherds who discerned what God was doing. They were not the experts and they were not the reactionaries at the loud center of religious noise; they were quiet people on the silent edges of contemplative thought.

Gazing at stars and keeping watch by night are profound metaphors for the contemplative life. To most people, it would appear that the Magi and the shepherds were doing nothing of significance in their long nighttime vigils, but they were the ones who were able to discern what God was doing. It was contemplative stargazers and shepherds, having learned how to wait in silence, who found their way to Bethlehem. They were the ones who discerned what God was doing in the seemingly ordinary event of a young woman giving birth in an out of the way place.

**Waiting for God to act** only seems like waiting for God to act. God is always acting because *God is always loving the world and always giving birth to something*. Waiting for God to act is actually waiting for your soul to become quiet enough and contemplative enough to discern what God is doing in the obscure and forgotten corners, far from the corridors of power or wherever you think the action is.

We want God to act in the imperial capital of Rome, but God first acts in a stable on the edge of Bethlehem.

We want God to act in Washington, DC, but God first acts in the quiet corner of your own living room.

So, let me say this to you quite confidently: **God is about to act**. God is about to act in your life and in our world. But if you want to discern the actions of God you must learn to first wait in quiet contemplation.

Before you can become an activist, you must first become a contemplative; otherwise you'll just be a re-activist. And re-activists merely recycle anger and keep the world an angry place. Jesus was a contemplative activist, but never a re-activist.

So, learn to gaze at the stars. Learn to keep vigil in the fields. Learn to sit with Jesus. Learn to be quiet. Learn to wait. Then, and only then, will you begin to discern what God is doing.

May this Advent help prepare you to discern what God is about to do in your life and in our world. □

*Brian Zahnd pastors in St. Joseph, MO. He is the author of Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God.*

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flung his doors open to me! This young woman spoke directly to those diminishing messages of doubt that I had been listening to for days—and the kicker—this young Ugandan woman, who I crossed paths with randomly on a trip to South Africa, was named “Blessing,” so appropriately named by her mother!

Brad and I have recently been overtaken by situations and circumstances that could leave us asking the wrong question and forgetting God’s history and record of being there with us.

Instead, I am standing in a spacious place—an open space where God’s grace and glory allow me to stand tall and even shout praise!

### Meditation

In closing, I offer some questions that I hope will bring to remembrance your “God stories.”

1. Do you feel vulnerable to getting stuck in the question, “Is God with me or not?” If so, what might that cost you?

2. Do you have some “God stories”—instances where you felt God’s nearness to you—where you recognized that Christ is Emmanuel: God with you?

3. When was the last time you shared that story with someone else or spent time reflecting on it for yourself? What is the fruit of remembering and sharing?

4. Take a bit of time to recall one of your “God stories.” Try to remember the details as best you can. How did that change your life that day? How does it change your life today? What was God’s message to you in that encounter?

5. Do you know someone else who might need to hear that message? Tell them your story—remember the generosity of God, remember how close and present he is to you always!

Remember, Christ is your Emmanuel—*God with you!* □

*Eden Jersak is married to Brad Jersak. She is the author of the devotional book, Rivers from Eden: Forty Days of Intimate Conversation with God.*