

**“ROOM FOR PEACE”**  
**Aa Sermon Preached at**  
**FIRST UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
**Belleville, IL**  
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**Dec. 14, 2025**  
(transcribed from audio file)

Siblings in Christ, let’s now listen to the Word of God today given to us in the gospel according to Matthew 1:18-25.

*Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:*

*“Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel,”*

*which means, “God is with us.” When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife but had no marital relations with her until she had given birth to a son, and he named him Jesus. NRSVue*

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Did you ever pick out, like a shirt to wear and then wonder if you’ve got a pair of pants that go with it? That happened to me this morning and then I realized, yes I do. I am all in for Ugly Christmas Sweater Sunday. I love Ugly Christmas Sweater Sunday. I believe in Ugly Christmas Sweater Sunday. You know how much I love this. She’s had to listen to me talk about it all week long. This is....It’s just....I think

a good ugly Christmas sweater can be a sort of gospel message. Stick with me! It's gonna work out by the end of the sermon.

I mean, we've got some good ones. Matthew. Mark. Luke. John. But ugly Christmas sweater has a message too. Before we get into it, I want to.... There are some things about the scripture passage I think that immediately people get caught up on and I feel like I want to take care of it.

One is like, okay are we naming this kid Jesus or Emanuel, cause it seems like there are conflicting messages here. If you heard in the scripture passage Joseph received a vision, gonna name him Jesus and then Matthew says, you know, it's just to fulfill as it said in Isaiah, that they would call him Emanuel. What? And then he's born and they name him Jesus. Wait a minute! What happened to Emanuel? Is that gonna be the name?

Emanuel is a title. Emanuel tells you more about what Jesus' name really means, because the name Jesus comes from a name which means, God saves us. And what Emanuel does is, it tells you how God is going to save us. Because what Emanuel means is, God with us. And what Matthew, in his entire gospel is laying out to you is this idea to understand that Jesus is not just the fulfilment of the prophets, but in particular Jesus will come and save us and does this by being with us. This is the point where ugly Christmas sweaters starts doing the work and has a good message for us.

Because honestly, to the people of this time, the idea that God would come in full human likeness, take on the full nature of humanity is as ridiculous as this sweater I am wearing. The idea that God would wear humanity and walk amongst us almost seemed obscene. Some would say that this sweater with the dinosaur opening the gifts, and the two giant Christmas trees is obscene. In a similar way the idea of God coming to be with us is a completely obscene idea and yet this is how it is done. That God would take on all of the ugliness that is in this world.

Now, part of a Christmas sweater like this working out is timing. You can't wear this in July. Not just because it would be too hot, but because they'd say something was wrong with you. In the same way, Jesus came in a very particular time. It was just the right season because at the particular time you had the Roman Empire set up with its connections and networks so that when this one light comes into existence within our realm it's able to have this effect, not only to multiply in the region, but would spread out to so many other regions, using that very imperfect, flawed, ugly, corrupt Roman Empire system so that the message that God had for us, through the

coming of Jesus, could spread. This ugliness of wearing humanity and living amongst us and being with us, came at just the right season.

Another thing about ugly Christmas sweaters is that when we look around today, there is a lot going on in this room. When you look around and you see folks and sometimes, you're thinking like, "that's a bold choice even for Ugly Christmas Sweater Sunday", but that acceptance that you still well up to that person, and I'm assuming you're feeling acceptance right now – good Christian vibes. That's how we're supposed to look at everybody all the time because when God came to be with us, that real sense of peace, it wasn't to erase all the messiness and crazies, it was to enter it with us, to be part of the thread, part of the fabric of what humanity is.

And so when we look at others, it may not be as obvious as what we are wearing today, but we each wear our own bit of craziness which might be involved in the type of belief that we have. It might be involved in some of the actions that we make. It might be involved in some of the political affiliations we have. Whatever it is, we look at one another and no matter how ugly, bizarre it might seem to us, we accept that there is a thread of God within each and every person and we have to look for that. We can't get caught up on the glittery dinosaur. We have to see that there is God at work in each and every person and it pushes us to the limit, but it's meant to, because as God is with us, God is with all of us and God is working with and through all of us.

And so, we can no longer look around and discount people because of the appearance we see on the outside. But the lesson that the scriptures give us and the lesson the ugly Christmas sweater gives us is that we are still together, united by Christ. There is a bit of that divine thread working through each of the lives that we see. We don't get to discount. We don't get to declare that something is unworthy or de-valued because we know that God has been with us and so we look for that in each person that we are with.

There are times when it may seem outrageous the faith that we hold on to and so a good gospel encourages us to go ahead and be a little foolish for the sake of what Christ has done. To be willing to wear our faith even in places where others may not always value it, but it's part of our celebration. It's part of our witness and however you wear that image of God that is within you, however you wear that work of Christ that has been done through humanity, wear it with a pride and a joy and a knowing that you are part of something that is beautiful and is meant to bring peace to this world, not by getting rid of all the messiness, but instead by being willing to be there with one another in the messiness.

And when we get to that point from what we have learned from the scriptures and what we've learned from our sweaters, we might actually get to the point where we can look at one another and simply love, so that the things that threaten to divide us, they don't get to take over. What gets to take over is the idea that God is with us together.

So, may you go forth and may the witness that you wear show the world that God is with us and that God loves us and that you intend to be a part of that.

To God be the glory.

Halleluiah and Amen.