

Tuesday, March 25: Surely God is With Us

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<https://open.spotify.com/track/47BTpUoofvXYCkRhgCHnqK?si=30874d9d5b724dae>

On September 19, 1997, the singer Rich Mullins died in a tragic car accident on Interstate 39 in Illinois. He was only 41 years old.

Just days before his untimely death, Rich went into an abandoned church in the city of Elgin and made a tape recording of nine songs. These simple recordings, which feature Rich himself playing guitar and piano, were eventually released as “The Jesus Demos” (the first disc of the posthumous album *The Jesus Record*).

One of these songs is entitled “Surely God Is With Us,” a phrase that recalls the biblical name “Emmanuel.” This name is familiar to us from the first chapter of Matthew, where we are told that Jesus’ miraculous birth took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken through the prophet Isaiah: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel (which means, God with us)” (Matt. 1:22–23; cf. Isa. 7:14).

Given this scriptural source, we might expect Rich’s song to be a kind of verbal nativity scene, complete with awestruck shepherds and singing angels—but that is not at all what we find.

Instead, Rich offers a lighthearted but profound meditation on the mystery of the incarnation. His song is about the eternal Word of God who “became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). It is about Christ himself, who is not only fully divine but also fully human, and who has given us the power to become “children of God” through faith (John 1:12).

In this season of Lent, as we prepare to celebrate the death and resurrection of the Lamb of God, “who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29), let us allow Rich to help us meditate on the identity of our Savior.

One of the things that Rich does very well in this song is to highlight the divine strangeness of Christ. He behaves in unexpected ways and says unexpected things. His identity is difficult for human beings to pin down. “Is he a prophet?” “Is he a preacher?” “Where is he from?” “Who is his daddy?” These are exactly the kinds of questions that people asked during his earthly ministry.

Christ, of course, tells us who he is: He is the Son of God whom the Father sent into the world “that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:17). Therefore, when we encounter Jesus, we are encountering “God with us,” our divine Lord who became human for the sake of our salvation.

But who is included in the word “us”? It is not just the prim and proper. It is not just those whom others regard as holy or devout. No, when we say, “Surely God is with us,” we mean that he is

with the paupers, he is with the simpletons and rogues, he is with the whores and the drunks. Indeed, the very first time that Rich moves into the chorus, he does so by framing it as the toast of these lowly sinners—and we, who are also sinners, have the chance to join in their words.

As we devote ourselves to fasting, prayer, and almsgiving, let us not forget that Christ is “Emmanuel.” When we love our enemy, God is with us. When we rejoice in pain, God is with us. When we turn the other cheek, God is with us. He is with us always, “until the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20).

In the final verse of the song, Rich turns his attention to Christ’s death and resurrection. The first half of the verse focuses on the sorrow of the passion, when Christ was tortured and nailed to a tree (cf. Acts 5:30). But then Rich moves on to the joy of Easter: “See the scars and touch his wounds, his risen flesh and bone. Now the sinners have become the saints, and the lost have all come home.”

Rich invites us to join the Apostle Thomas in seeing the risen Jesus and reaching out to touch his wounds (cf. John 20:24–29). Let us also join Thomas in confessing Christ to be our Lord and God (cf. John 20:28), and let us not hesitate to proclaim the Good News: “Surely God is with us—today!”