

TRINITY EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH
MINOCQUA, WI
SERMON FOR CHRISTMAS EVE, DECEMBER 24, 2020

¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

²⁰ But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus. (Matthew 1:18-25 EHV)

Can you feel it – the spirit of Christmas, the spirit of giving? The holidays bring out the best in people, don't they? Everyone is a tad more cheerful, humming Christmas carols under their breath. People tend to be patient and understanding, what with the long lines and traffic and challenges to get everything shipped and wrapped and done in time. People even seem to be better drivers, more courteous, willing let others changes lanes and merge into traffic more safely and easily.

Hmm...Not in this town. Certainly not in big cities. Not on this planet. Not even today. Oh, there are some unexpected expressions of kindness and courtesy, but it's still pretty nasty out there.

There is, however, a true spirit of giving at work. We're looking to do things for people from gift giving to sending money to charity to helping an older neighbor or a struggling family. Doing things for others is how we express that we've learned the truth that it is better to give than to receive.

These gestures of "for" matter because we try to make relationships better, to make the world better, to be better people by doing things "for" people. And we want to – God's love for us motivates us to want to do for others. Even our culture gets the sense of doing "for" others. We're grateful to military personnel for their service for us. When disaster strikes a family, a part of the country, another part of the world, we do whatever it takes to provide help for them. Go Fund Me pages raise money "for" people in need.

But "for" isn't enough, it doesn't get to the heart of things. You can do something for someone else and then walk away, feeling good about yourself, but help is still needed. You can give generous gifts to everyone on your list, getting for them things that amaze and astound, and then comes the day after Christmas – back to work, the beginning of another year, back to school, back to the grind of life, the hard work of relationships, the frustrations of setbacks and circumstances beyond our control. "For" isn't the fix. "For" isn't the answer.

God celebrates Christmas a different way. God speaks a different word. The prophet Isaiah foretold it, the angel told Joseph, and Matthew records it: ***"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us")***. And then in John's gospel, we get this summary statement of what Christmas means: ***"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, (literally) he lived with us"*** (John 1:14). Such a humble even geeky little word, nothing more than a preposition, but this is the word that lies at the heart of Christmas and at the heart of the Christian faith. The most important word is "with."

Think back to the very beginning of all things. John's gospel says, ***"The Word was with God...He was with God in the beginning with God. Without him nothing was made that has been made"*** (John 1:1-3). In other

words, before anything else, there was a “with.” The “with” between God and the Word, or more simply, between the Father and the Son. Add the Holy Spirit, and you’ve got the threefold “with,” the Trinity. Think about how Jesus concludes his ministry. His very last words in Matthew’s gospel are, **“Surely, I am with you always.”** (Matthew 28:20) In other words, there will never be a time when I am not “with” you. And at the very end of the Bible, when the book of Revelation describes what heaven will be like, this is what the voice from heaven says: **“Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God.”** (Rev 21:3)

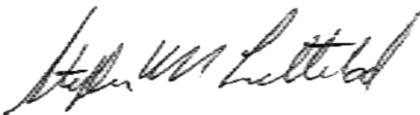
We need Immanuel. We need God with us. But why would he come? No matter what we do for others, we can’t erase the guilt and death our sins deserve. That sinful nature in us lives for you/me, it generates lies, lusts for various appetites, lack of contentment, lack of self-control, selfishness that reveals who we really, ultimately live for, and that’s for self.

We need Immanuel. God with us. God for us, too. And on this night, he comes, wrapped in our humanity, assuring us in this most amazing way that he has come for us. He would do so much for us – the crib of Christmas leads to the cross of Calvary. The one who came forth from Mary’s womb would one day come forth from Joseph’s tomb for us to give us forgiveness and peace and joy everlasting.

And something else. Something “with.” Life with God. He could have done all of this, I suppose, and then walked away, feeling good about himself, that he did for us something we can’t possibly do. You can do “for” someone without a conversation, without a real relationship – we do it all the time. But the COVID-19 pandemic has reminded us of the importance of being “with” people, not just “for” them at a distance. Indeed, God doesn’t do “for” us without wanting to be “with” us. Such grace, such love, that we matter to him, he even names his son Immanuel, God with us, to remind us that everything he does “for” us is based on that fact that he has chosen to be “with” us.

What about tomorrow, the next day, next week, next year when life is still nasty and vicious and frustrating and maybe even nearing its end – will he still be with us, will he still be Immanuel? No doubt. King David expresses this in his amazing words, **“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”** (Psalm 23:4)

Here is the true Spirit of Christmas – not the spirit of the holiday or of good cheer or of giving or good will or whatever spirits people are chasing this time of night. It’s the Spirit of God, the reality of Immanuel, God is with us.



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