

Well, we want to thank you for joining with us here tonight to celebrate Christmas Eve together. The Christmas season is the one time of the year that seems to be celebrated by most people in our culture, regardless of nationality or economic status or social standing, or even whatever kind of religious background they might have – or even if they don’t have any at all. Yet in spite of the fact that many celebrate this season together, we are quite divided as to *why* we are celebrating the Christmas season.

The truth be told, there is no other religion the world that believes Christmas is a celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of the world. There has been some pushback against this over the last few years, in that in order not to offend anyone who doesn’t believe in the Christian faith, we are now urged to say, “Happy Holidays” rather than “Merry Christmas.” What that means for us tonight is, by the Canadian Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms “I wish you a “Merry Christmas.”

We are here tonight to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of the world. We all have been preparing for this in various ways; enjoying a mixture of hustle-bustle and holiday cheer. There’s a lot to do to get ready for Christmas: decorations, baking, cards, shopping, parties, social gatherings - all to somehow fit everything together into the regular rhythm of our lives. At times we can become so busy in this season, we forget the reason for it all. It’s then we need to stop and reflect on all of the joys that come with celebrating this season - perhaps the biggest joy is being together with family and friends. Nobody wants to be alone for Christmas - and there’s a reason for that.

God created us as creatures of *relationship*. We need each other. That’s why when I’m on a trip somewhere without my wife Nancy and I enjoy a great meal or take in some breath-taking scenery, I feel like something is missing. Things are not the same when Nancy is not with me. When she is with me even a crummy meal and a boring road trip is special. The significance is that *we’re together*. God made us that way. He made us in a way that we need real, genuine relationships with our families, with friends. And amazingly, all these relationships stem from the most important relationship God created us for and that He’s wired us for – and that is our relationship with Him.

This time of year we see a lot of Nativity Scenes. The main figures are Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus. This is the focal point of Christmas - the birth of Jesus. But my hope on this night is that our scope of celebration will be expanded when we look at the baby Jesus - because Christmas is not just about a baby born in a barn. It’s not even just about the Son of God being born as a baby in a barn. More than anything tonight is about our relationship with God in the past and in present and in the future.

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus. Matthew 1:18-25

“*They shall call his name Immanuel.*” Jesus’ name was significant enough to Matthew that he defines it for us in the scripture: “*God with us*”. There is unexplainable significance to that reality. That God would even consider, let alone be willing, to lower Himself to become a human being from His infinite and holy place of ultimate authority over the universe - where He was in perfect relationship with Himself is incomprehensible.

But God do so, because of our relationship with Him. But why go through all this trouble? Why didn't God just come to us as God, like He used to in the Garden of Eden?

Well, we can answer those questions by looking at Jesus birth and the Christmas story as being part of a larger story. The answer begins right after the beginning of creation when the first human beings decided to rebel against God and reject the God who created them - which broke the relationship with God we were created for. When Adam and Eve rebelled and rejected God – which God calls “sin” – the consequences were immediate and decisive – as God's response was to allow pain and struggle and suffering and death to enter our lives and our world. But because we were created for *relationship*, immediately after God pronounced His punishment, God also declared His promise that He would send a Savior into the world who would destroy the hold that sin and death has on us, which would then restore our relationship with God. This is why Jesus came to us a human being rather than as God.

What this means is that Jesus is “*Immanuel*” - He WAS “*God with us*” in the flesh to be our *substitute*. The only way to restore our relationship with God was to remove the rejection and rebellion of sin. *This is the primary reason that Jesus came to us in the flesh*. He came to take the consequences for our sin against God. Because God is holy and just, he cannot simply ignore sin. The right and just punishment for sin is God's wrath and spiritual death. And so *either* everyone who sins needs to pay this price (which means an eternity of punishment and severed relationship with God) or someone needed to live a perfect life without sin and pay that price as a substitute. And that's what Jesus did. Jesus Christ was born to die. He did for us what we could not do for ourselves. And this wasn't an afterthought. 700 years earlier these words were written as it they had already happened in Isaiah 53:4-6:

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

The means by which Jesus would take the penalty for our sin in our place would be one of the most horrific means of death known to mankind. Jesus, Immanuel, *God with us*, the one who humbled himself by being born as a baby - would culminate in Jesus hanging on a cross in humiliation. The innocent Son of God who lived a perfect life, who demonstrated perfect love, who exuded perfect compassion for the purpose of becoming a sacrificial Lamb for our sins – was hammered to a cross, battered and beaten by men and abandoned by God the Father. He endured the wrath of the Father as punishment for sin and then he died. But the perfect Son of God also rose from the dead and defeated sin and death. And so now, for every man and woman and child who call on Jesus' name and put their trust in Jesus as their Lord and Savior, God offers peace and hope and joy and forgiveness and a right standing before God, and a restored relationship with God - and a new life and eternal life with God.

In Ephesians 2:4-5 the apostle Paul declares: “*But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ - by GRACE you have been saved.*” The apostle John tells us that: “*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of GRACE and truth. . . . For from his fullness we have all received, GRACE upon GRACE*” (John 1:14, 16). Our souls sing of the old song:

Marvelous grace of our loving Lord; grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt!
Yonder on Calvary's mount outpoured; there where the blood of the Lamb was spilt.
Grace, grace, God's grace, grace that will pardon and cleanse within;
Grace, grace, God's grace; Grace that is greater than all our sin!

Because Jesus was “*Immanuel*” – because He WAS “*God with us*” in the flesh to be our substitute – our relationship with God has been restored. The relationship we were created for, that was broken has been fixed

and our lives now have meaning, purpose and significance. Much was accomplished through Jesus coming as a man but this is the primary: God was with us in the flesh to restore our relationship with God – and so He could be with us, *even now* - 2000 years after his birth, death and resurrection.

What this means is that Jesus is “*Immanuel*” - He IS “*God with us*” now - through His Holy Spirit. In John 16:7, just before his crucifixion, Jesus told his disciples: “*I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.*” In the flesh, Jesus couldn’t be all places at all times. But through His Spirit, all people from every nation for all generations can be restored back to God in intimate relationship with Him. While we cannot have a relationship with Jesus in the flesh like his disciples, we can have a relationship with him in the Spirit. At the end of Matthew’s gospel we read of the end of “*Immanuel: God WAS with us in the flesh*” and the beginning of “*Immanuel: God IS with us through the Spirit*” when Jesus declared: “*Behold, I am with you always to the end of the age*” (Matthew 28:20). This was always God’s plan in being born as a baby - and this is the relationship that we know with God through the Spirit of Christ. Everyone who has ever truly believed in Jesus Christ has received His Spirit. *The Holy Spirit in us is God with us.*

If you are born again Christian you know what I mean. We have a distinct awareness of the presence of God in our lives. We may not understand it or be able to explain it. We may sense it stronger some days than others but the truth is He is always with us and He is always active in us. It’s the Spirit of God that opens our eyes to understand the Bible, brings conviction of sin and gives us the desire to follow the example and commands of Jesus. The Spirit heals and comforts, directs and leads, encourages and gives strength. The Spirit resides within us, changing us into the image of Christ. God’s plan wasn’t just to restore our relationship and then leave us on our own. Now, through our relationship with Jesus, He is changing us to be like Him. The Holy Spirit is that change agent - *Christ within us to form Christ in us.*

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. 2 Corinthians 3:17-18

But the story doesn’t end with the active presence of God with us through the Holy Spirit. Jesus tells us that he is coming back! In John 14:1-3 Jesus said: “*Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.*” What this means is that Jesus is “*Immanuel*” - He is “*God who WILL BE with us*” - forever in the glory of heaven! The ultimate goal of Jesus’ birth and the Christmas story is the complete restoration of everything. In Christ we know that someday we will be with Him face to face, without sin, without the hindrances of distractions and temptations and limitations. But for now we are to live mindful of that day; in eager anticipation of His return to take us home to glory.

Between Matthew’s emphasis on “*God was with us*” in flesh and “*God is with us*” in the Spirit - we find instructions and warnings about how to live now - *because* Jesus is returning. We are to always be prepared; to live watchful lives; with eager anticipation. And this will have a distinct effect on our lives. We will resemble Jesus because Jesus was with us and Jesus is with us and Jesus will be with us forever.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:5-11

There is a name I love to hear; I love to sing its worth.
It sounds like music in my ear; the sweetest name on earth.
O, how I love Jesus; O, how I love Jesus,
O, how I love Jesus; because he first loved me!

“So that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” On the day that Jesus returns, every man and woman and child will stand before Him alone and we all will give an account for our lives, and we will all fall short; and we all will be found wanting. For some, this will be a fearful day that will end with the wrath of God of being cast out of the presence of God forever, being left alone to spend eternity paying the price for sin against God. But for all who come to that day having put their trust in Jesus Christ, Immanuel, *“God with us”* - they won't be surprised that they have fallen short *because* in Christ they already know they desperately need God. They won't be trusting in their own works or merits *because* in Christ they know Jesus has already did everything that needs to be done on the cross.

A story is told a grandfather who found his young grandson jumping up and down in his playpen, crying at the top of his voice. When little Johnnie saw his grandfather, he reached up with his little chubby hands and said, "Out, Grampa, out." It was only natural for the grandfather to reach down to lift his grandson out of his predicament - but as he did the mother of the child stepped in and said: "No, Johnnie, you are being punished--so you must stay in." The grandfather was at a loss to know what to do. The child's tears and little hands reached deep into his heart. But the mother's firmness in correcting her son could not be taken lightly. But the grandfather found a way to help his grandson. He could not take the little boy out of the playpen, and so instead he climbed in with him. That is what God did on the day of Jesus birth; he left the glory of heaven and climbed into the body of a baby named Jesus, Immanuel, *“God with us.”* That is also what God did through our Lord Jesus Christ, who climbed up onto a cross in our place for our sins. That is the meaning of Christmas. In leaving heaven for earth God climbed into our punishment for sin *“with us.”* The Bible says: *“The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.”* C. S. Lewis put it this way: “God became man to enable men to become the sons of God.”

This is the night we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of the world. He is Immanuel – the God who WAS with us, the God who IS with us, and the God WILL BE WITH US forever. Celebrate Jesus birth and celebrate your restored relationship with God. But I pray you look beyond the manger and celebrate the active presence of God and the Spirit of God in your life now. And let this remind you that just as sure as Jesus came as a baby Jesus will someday return as a victorious King.

If you are not in relationship with God through Jesus Christ, I invite you to do so tonight. Look at the baby in the manger and see the provision He has made for you to be restored back to God the Father. Give your life to Him and He will give you new life and an eternal life. And for those of us who are in an intimate relationship with God through Jesus Christ now – let us live our lives in light of His return in anticipation of eternity with God. “God with us” now is the guarantee that we will be with Him forever!

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