

God with Us!

King of Glory Lutheran Church
Pastor Ruth Ann Loughry
Christmas Eve 2022

¹In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

God chooses to be in relationship with us through Jesus. He is Immanuel. God with us. Permanently. Willingly. Unconditionally. This is the God we worship, through the baby Jesus Christ. Amen

Beloved of God, Merry Christmas! It is such an amazing night, this night that Jesus was born. It's all about relationships! Yes, Christmas is about relationship. Connection. Bonds of Love. God's Grace. Forgiveness. Hope! Oh, my holy goodness, it's incredible. On this night, we worship God who came to offer us a new relationship through God's only Son, Jesus Christ. This is why He is called Immanuel, God with us.

Eve Backsen, is seven years old and a member of King of Glory. She came up to me with her hands on her hips two Sundays ago. Eve said, “Why are they worshipping nobody?”

I replied: What do you mean? ‘Why are they worshipping nobody?’

Eve pointed in the general direction of this beautiful manger scene, and I answered, “Oh, you’re wondering why baby Jesus isn’t in the manger?”

Eve said rather emphatically. “Yes! He’s not there!”

I explained that because it wasn’t Christmas yet, we didn’t have him in the manger. Just like we were counting time with the candles on the Advent wreath, we had to wait until Christmas Eve. Then I asked her if she wanted to see where we had him hidden. Head nodded just as emphatically. She thought it was hilarious that the loin clad baby Jesus was lying on the counter in the office, likely shivering day and night. I don’t tell this story to make fun of Eve. Indeed, I love it when children ask questions! How else do they learn the faith?

‘Why are they worshipping nobody?’ It’s tempting, isn’t it, to worship nobody? It could be easy to fall into the trap of beginning to worship the Christmas holiday over God, or worship our stuff, or finding the right gift.

There was a cartoon picture of Mary and Joseph with the baby Jesus inside the manger. Outside the manger up on the hill, there is a man holding a box of straw. He’s also holding a sign that reads, “For sale, straw from the Messiah’s Birthplace.” Joseph tells Mary, “I don’t believe it! Someone’s trying to commercialize this!” (yourlifematterstogod.blogspot.com)

Oh... we do not worship nobody. This night we worship God, who loved us so much, that God became a human and came down to earth. God wants to be with us. God does love us and comfort us. God longs to help us forgive ourselves and one another.

Did we hear the angel’s words to the shepherds? “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” This night is all about Jesus, of course! Yet it’s also a night about us! God wanted to come and love us, to be with us!

This God-with-us, Immanuel God, is very concerned about you and me. God has a relationship with creation; all the animals and insects. But God has a relationship with you and me. I'm not certain what comes to mind when you hear the word 'relationship.' Perhaps you think of either a truly wonderful relationship you have or one which ended terribly. Often the way we think about our current or past relationships are the ways we believe God connects with us. Yet God takes what we know about human connection and enlarges it. Pushes it out. God is so much more than what we know about relationships.

God is an advocate. A lover. God is a companion and friend. God is patient and kind. The Bible says God is our hiding place and rock. God is like a gate, or vine or The Way!

Whatever baggage we carry, old hurts or wounds from people we love or those we thought we loved, God's grace and love can heal all of that! If God is our hiding place and rock, we go to God when we're scared. Angry. Confused. God helps us find a place to stand strong or at least stand up again.

God loves in ways we've never been loved before, and we also experience God's love in others. In fact, it's because of God's love, that we are moved to be in relationship with others.

True story! Two weeks before Christmas, two nine-year old girls were walking down the street talking about what they hoped to get for Christmas. They stopped to talk to an old man named Harry, who was on his knees pulling weeds from around a large oak tree. He wore a frayed, woolen jacket and a pair of worn garden gloves. His fingers were sticking out, blue from the cold.

Harry told them he was getting the yard in shape as a Christmas gift to his mother who had passed away. "This yard and these trees were all she had," he said, his eyes brimming with tears. "She was all I had, so it's my Christmas present to her," as he patted the old oak. The girls were eager to help, and it took the rest of the day to weed around all the trees. He pressed a quarter into each of their hands before they departed. "Sorry I can't pay you more. It's all I have right now."

The house was shabby. No curtains in the windows. No Christmas tree or wreath. The next day, one friend called the other. They decided to put their quarters in a jar marked, "Harry's Christmas Present." Right away they began to seek out small jobs to earn more. Every nickel, dime, and quarter they earned went into the jar.

Two days before Christmas found them on Harry's doorstep singing carols. When he opened the door, they presented him with new gloves, a card and a pumpkin pie still warm from the oven. With trembling hands, he tore the paper from the gloves, and then to their astonishment, he held them to his face and wept. (Illustrations Unlimited. James S. Hewett, Editor. Tyndale House Publishers. Wheaton Illinois. 1988. Pg 84.)

Harry, felt their kindness and caring...their love. What he truly felt was God's love. Oh, if the whole world could learn to love unselfishly like God, we would live in a different world!

This time of year, our people bonds are what we think about. It's why there are long lines at the post office. It's why stores and websites have markdowns and sales; so that we buy that perfect gift for that special, yet imperfect person!

God moves us to remember those we love. We also remember those who don't have what we have and love them through gifts to non-profits and our prayers.

Yet tonight, we made time for and remembered to come to worship the Holy One we love, who loves us. God Immanuel. God remembered God's people once again. God decided to send to earth, God's very self in Jesus Christ, God's Son.

It sounds almost too incredible to believe, yes? No rooms in the village, a teenage virgin birth, shepherds receiving miraculous messages from a heavenly choir, and the Son of God born in a smelly stall under the quiet gaze of the cattle Yet, God worked through lowly humans to make the plan come alive. So much did God wish to give us this gift, Jesus Christ to be forever with God's people.

I promise you this. God's relationship with you, is one relationship you can be totally honest in – all the time. *God came to earth to love us and live with us. Permanently. Willingly. Unconditionally.* God promises to never leave us. Never abandon us. Never stop loving us. *This is the God we worship, through the baby Jesus Christ.*

When you come forward for Holy Communion on this Holy Night, listen for the words, "For you." That's what Christmas is all about. Open your heart to hear once again and be inspired by the astonishing love of God who sent Jesus to us. "For to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."
Amen!