

IMMANUEL—GOD IS WITH US

A Christmas Message

“This is how Jesus Christ was born. A young woman named Mary was engaged to Joseph from King David’s family. But before they were married, she learned that she was going to have a baby by God’s Holy Spirit. Joseph was a good man and did not want to embarrass Mary in front of everyone. So he decided to quietly call off the wedding.

“While Joseph was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord came to him in a dream. The angel said, ‘Joseph, the baby that Mary will have is from the Holy Spirit. Go ahead and marry her. Then after her baby is born, name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.’

“So the Lord’s promise came true, just as the prophet had said, ‘A virgin will have a baby boy, and he will be called Immanuel,’ which means ‘God is with us’” (Luke 1:18-23, *Contemporary English Version*).

We live in a world that is often mundane, crass, and ugly. We need God with us. We experience tragedy, violence, and injustice in our world. We need God with us. All of us succumb to sickness, disease, and eventually death. We need God with us. Our world is filled with hate, racism, and strife. We need God with us. The reality of evil, godlessness, and sin exists in our world. We need God with us.

Notice the strangeness, yet the wonder of God’s presence among men and women. God with us runs contrary to natural law. God with us is not normal according to the common understanding of normal. Luke tells us that the birth of Jesus, God with us, *Immanuel*, happened like this, and then he describes some very unusual circumstances. Mary was “found to be with child.” Her pregnancy became obvious. But she was a virgin. Now this is not the usual and normal way to get pregnant! However, the wondrous working of God’s presence among us, God with us, runs contrary to human expectation. It is of the Holy Spirit.

Notice also that God with us causes humans to change plans or to act and think differently than what is ordinary. Joseph was a righteous man. When Mary’s pregnancy became obvious, he could not in good conscience marry her, since she was now thought to be unfaithful. Such a marriage might also have been seen as an admission of his own guilt. But Joseph was also a compassionate man. He was unwilling to expose Mary to the disgrace of public divorce. So he chose a quieter way, a way permitted by the law. But this was no ordinary event. It was God with us. When God intervened in a dream, Joseph’s thinking and his actions radically changed. “He did as the Lord commanded, and he took Mary home as his wife.” God with us will change our plans.

Above all, God with us comes to remedy the root cause of humanities problems. Mary and Joseph are drawn into the mystery of the incarnation. The angel tells them, “You will call his name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” This proclamation echoes Psalm 130:8, “The Lord himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.” The child is not to be a political savior, he is to be a savior from sin. Sin is the basic cause of all of our world’s woes, and it is the fundamental purpose of God with us. God meets us at the point of our most basic need.

So rejoice, *Immanuel* has come! God is with us! “A child has been born for us. We have been given a son who will be our ruler. His names will be Wonderful Advisor and Mighty God, Eternal Father and Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6, *Contemporary English Version*).