

Immanuel©**John 1:1-5; 10-14****December 31, 2017****Dr. Sharlyn Gates**

I'm still basking in the glow of our Christmas Eve morning service from last Sunday, with our sweet children here with us, dressed as sheep and shepherds. Sweet voices ringing out the shepherd's words of following the star – for “a long, long time!”

Everything here is just so sweet when our children are with us, isn't it? And that morning we had lots of extra family members with us as well, to add to the sweetness. There's just nothing that compares with being together with those we love.

Christmas Eve night was, of course, as special as always, as we come together here in the candlelight, the dimmed over head lights, hearing the Christmas story read from the Bible and singing the carols together; circling the sanctuary and lighting our individual candles from the Christ candle. I love to see how the Light of Christ spreads as our lights are lit, reflecting the light of the Christ candle.

It's such a vivid image of what John says about how the “light came into the darkness and the darkness could not overcome it.” As we, who are Christ- followers, let our lights shine as we reflect His light, it just gets brighter. The darkness cannot overcome the light. We are an important factor in keeping that light bright for a world who still lives in the dark.

I hope you had some family or friends with you at Christmas. I think that one of the loneliest things to experience would be being alone at Christmas.

I've felt a little sad at Christmas when we couldn't be with family. After Fred and I were married and he went back into the pastoral ministry, it suddenly hit me that we were no longer going to be able to do the traditional thing with my family which was always to go to the candlelight service, which was early – like 4:30 in the afternoon – and then go to my grandmothers for Christmas Eve dinner where my other grandparents and my aunt and uncle and cousins would all be with us. After I was grown, we were always there with my children. Family just got bigger and bigger but we were always together.

And suddenly we could not go anymore. I loved the Christmas Eve service Fred led and I had a part in but still, it was hard to accept being apart from my family.

Of course, when my mother died, that was the hardest Christmas of all. To suddenly not have her bright, excited voice and face with us was devastating. Even though many of us got together at a some point it was so lonely without her.

Yet, even in those times when we were missing loved ones, we were never really alone. I was always with Fred, even if no one else was there. And we always had phone calls and love that was expressed in those talks.

I know there are people who are truly totally alone. And Christmas can be a very hard time for those people. Especially for those who do not know the love of God; who have not experienced Immanuel.

And what was it that we said *Immanuel* means? *God with us!* Think about it. God wanted to be with us so much that he came to us in the incarnation. He came to be born as we are born. He came to feel what we feel, to experience what we experience. He came to be every bit as human as you and I are human.

John tells us the Word (Jesus) became flesh and lived among us. Cornelius Plantinga writes in a commentary about that. He says “The high one became a low one.” (Jesus) the Son of God ... “became flesh – real flesh, messy flesh, entirely fleshy flesh...”

So maybe God the Son now hammers nails in Joseph’s carpenter shop, whacks his thumb, howls with the pain of it... The one who had existed from all eternity is born of a woman. The omniscient second person of the Trinity now has to ‘grow in knowledge and favor’ with human beings ...”

It is truly an amazing thing that God would come to us, to be with us, in our lowly state.

It was a dangerous time to be born. Especially to be born a Jew. And poor. At that time the land was occupied by Rome, and Caesar Augustus was emperor. Herod the Great was appointed king over Judea. He was a non-Jew – ruthless, coldhearted murderer.

It is said that King Herod murdered his wife, his three sons, his mother-in-law, his brother-in-law, his uncle and numerous others. His power meant more than anyone’s life to him.

Next week we will talk more about his ruthlessness as we hear about the wise men coming to Herod and asking for help in finding the King of the Jews. You already know that didn’t go over too great with Herod the Great.

But, to be a Jew and to be poor in a land occupied by people who had fun watching people suffer was not always easy. Life could be very hard. Yet, God chose to “be with us” in that time, in that situation, under those difficult circumstances.

When I think about children, especially at this time of year, I can’t help but wonder how Jesus was as a child. Jesus – God with us, who came as a tiny baby, born just like we are. I can’t help but speculate on these things:

Was he afraid? Afraid of the dark? Afraid of storms? Of people?

Did he need to be comforted by his mother when he fell down? Did he need to be disciplined by his human father when he misbehaved? Did he, as a child, misbehave? Surely he did, if he was like us.

Isn’t it wonderfully amazing that the God of the galaxies created us humans in his image – made us to be somehow like him; yet, he came to be like us? Created himself to be in our image?

But why? Why leave all the glory and power of heaven to come be with us? There are so many Christmas hymns that say it so well

God rest ye merry gentlemen, let nothing you dismay
Remember, Christ, our Savior was born on Christmas day
To save us all from Satan's power when we were gone astray

O tidings – (good news) – tidings of comfort and joy
Comfort and joy!

And from *“It Came Upon the Midnight Clear”* – I especially like the third verse that says:

And ye beneath life’s crushing load, whose forms are bending low, who toil along the climbing way with painful steps, and slow. Look now! For glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing; O rest beside the weary road, and hear the angels sing.

And there is the hymn *In the Bleak Midwinter*, frosty wind made moan, earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone; snow had fallen, snow on snow. In the bleak mid-winter, long ago.

Even today – all you have to do is look at the news to feel the bleakness of it all. Times really haven’t changed much since the day Jesus was born.

We still have wars, we still have people with such a desire for power that they will do anything to get and keep that power. We continue to have the poor struggling just to have food and shelter. We continue to have thousands upon thousands of refugees, of people who are homeless because of wars or disasters.

What an amazing comfort it is to know that God who created everything, who created us in his image and who loves us with a depth of love we cannot grasp, that same God saw our desperate need and came to be with us.

Yes, he grew up and he died and he left the earth. But it was a dying that sacrificed everything so we might come to know his love for us – his beloved children; so we might have forgiveness and life eternal with him; so that there would be nothing – not even death – that could ever separate us from that amazing love.

And while he is no longer here as a human, he gave us a gift that is everlasting – the gift of himself in the Holy Spirit so that we feel him in our hearts; so that the words in the scriptures become illumined for us to understand; so that, while we cannot see him, we know he is with us always; so that when we cry great tears of sorrow, we find comfort and peace, and when all seems to be falling apart, we find joy in him.

Incarnation means that God became human and lived with us to show us his love, to show us grace, and to promise to never leave us. Just as we have comfort and joy with our families, we have the glad and awesome reality of knowing God with us even today.

[This morning I want to invite you listen to the words sung by Clay Aiken, written by Mark Lowry.](#)

*"Mary, did you know that your baby boy would one day walk on water?
Mary, did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters?"*

*"Did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new?
This child that you've delivered, will soon deliver you."*

*"Mary, did you know that your baby boy would give sight to a blind man?
Mary, did you know that your baby boy would calm the storm with his hand?"*

*"Did you know that your baby boy has walked where angels trod?
When you kiss your little baby you kiss the face of God."*

"Mary Did You Know"

Sung by Clay Aiken

Written by Mark Lowry

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Immanuel – God with us!

Mary, did you know?

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