

Christmas Eve 2021  
*God With Us*  
December 24, 2021

**Message**

Love has come for you

Love has come for me

All the Earth will sing “Emmanuel!”<sup>i</sup>

*Emmanuel.*

It’s such an important word in understanding not just the *story* of Christmas, but the significance of Christmas.

At one point in Matthew’s account of the birth of Jesus he writes, “all of this took place in order to ...”

Oh, sorry, I almost forgot!

In case you're not familiar with Christianity ... Matthew was one of the original followers of Jesus.

Before he *met* Jesus, He was a tax collector for the Romans, so he was really good at recordkeeping.

And, after he began to *follow* Jesus, he applied those skills to keeping records of what Jesus said and did.

And we have those records today in *The Gospel According to Matthew* ... which is part of a collection of biblical writings known as *The New Testament*.

That's important to know because – and you

may have never thought of this – Christians don't believe in Jesus because “the Bible says so.”

We believe because there were eyewitnesses like Matthew and Peter and James and John who wrote down (or had someone else write down) what they saw and heard and experienced.

**Anyway ... in Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus, at one point he writes ...**

*All this took place ...*

This amazing scene of Jesus' birth with the manger and the angels and the shepherds and, later, the Wise Men from the East ...

*All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said [hundreds of years earlier] through the prophet [Isaiah]:*

*“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son ...*

*And they will call him “Emmanuel” (which means “God with us”).*

*Matthew 1:22-23 (NIV)*

If you’re going to understand Christmas and the significance of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, you have to understand what is meant by *Emmanuel*.

You have to understand what is meant by “God with us.”

## **Understanding “Emmanuel”**

And that’s what I want to talk to you about for the next few minutes.

**1. First of all, when we say “*Emmanuel*” it means that GOD is with us.**

It means that the Almighty, the Omnipotent, the Omniscient, the Omnipresent, the *Omni-whatever* Supreme Being of the Universe ...

*That* incredible and super-natural (beyond what is natural) “personage” (for lack of a better term) wants to be connected with you and with me.

And because Emmanuel is “*God with us*” and not “*us with God*” ...

**And it also means that *God* is the initiator – not you and not me.**

The possibility of a relationship between us and Him is *His* idea, not ours.

The desire for connection originates in *His* heart, not in yours or mine.

That's so different from how many people understand God or think of God.

- We think of God as being far away and not all that interested in what's happening in our lives.
- Or we think of God as someone who requires us to jump through all sorts of religious hoops to prove ourselves to be worthy of His attention.

But that little baby who showed up in the manger is evidence that these things are not so.

“Emmanuel” means God – the Being of all Beings – *wants* to be with us because He took the *initiative* to be with us.

**2. It also means that God is with us.**

And this is the hard part because Christians

believe (based on what Jesus' first followers have told us) ...

Christians believe that, through the miracle of the Virgin Birth, God actually became a human being in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and walked on this earth, just like we do.

And that's as shocking to us as it was to Mary.

"How can this be true?" she asked the angel. "Joseph and I haven't been together."

Of course, if you think about it, that kind of pregnancy actually happens all the time these days. They call it "artificial insemination" and we all know of children who've been conceived that way.

I believe that's what happened to Mary, just not with the seed of a man.

Instead, the All-Powerful One who spoke all things into existence, *spoke again* and a seed was planted in her womb.

And the result was “Emmanuel” – God *with us*, knowing what it is to be human *like us*.

Knowing what it is ...

- To be accepted ... and rejected
- To be loved ... and betrayed
- To be confident ... and unsure
- To be filled with joy ... and filled with grief.

**And because God is *with us*, we are not alone in facing the challenges of life.**

Of course, the more skeptical among us might



say, “maybe that was true back when Jesus was walking on this earth. He was ‘*with*’ people then. But what about now? How can He be with us, today?”

That’s a really good question ... and we’ll come back to it in just a minute.

But first, there’s one more piece to understanding what “Emmanuel” means.

- We’ve seen that it means that God is with us; that He desires to connect with us.
- And it means that God is with us; that we do not have to go through life alone.

**3. But “Emmanuel” also means that God is with us.**

And that’s really good news, because “us” – you and me – aren’t always the most desirable

people to be around.

We're selfish, we're greedy, we're petty, we're unforgiving, we're stubborn – and that's how we act towards the people we claim to love!

So, it really isn't much of a stretch to think of "the human race" as "a rebel race" as we heard a few minutes ago.

And God would be totally justified in saying, "That is *not* who I made you to be. I created you in My image to reflect my perfection and you have failed to measure up."

"So, I will have nothing to do with you."

But then, there's that Christmas word – Emmanuel ...

**God with us ... as we *really* are, not as we *pretend* to be or even as we *want* to be in**

## **our better moments.**

Emmanuel means that God entered into this world with His eyes wide open ...

- In search of the *real* you and the *real* me ...
- Fully aware of all of our sin – even the sin we don't know is sin ...
- And knowing ahead of time that many of us would reject him.

To me, that's what's so stunning about Christmas – even more stunning than the idea of a Virgin Birth.

Because *I* wouldn't do that kind of thing. *I* wouldn't “move in” with a bunch of rebels knowing in advance that many were going to reject me.

And yet, in Jesus of Nazareth, God did.

But why?

Because, as the song put it, “Love came down.”

A love that is so great for all of creation (including you and including me) that God was willing to do whatever it took to be with us and save us from ourselves and the messes we have made.

**As another of Jesus’ first followers put it ...**

*God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.  
John 3:16 (NIV)*

Love came down.

And hope was found.

All because of *Emmanuel*: God ... With ... Us ...  
you and me just as we are.

## **But How?**

Now, I don't know what kind of situation this Christmas Eve finds you in – good, bad, or ugly – but make no mistake about it: God cares about it because He cares about you.

And He wants to be with you in that situation, just as He came into the world on that first Christmas so long ago.

How does that happen? How can Jesus be with us when He is no longer “with us” – at least, not in the flesh?

One day He *will* be with us again, physically, when He returns to make all things new – which

is an amazing story of hope in and of itself.

But for now – today – how is Jesus with us?

Volumes have been written on what I'm about to say but let me try to make it as simple as I can.

**Jesus is with us in three ways: His words, His Spirit, and His Body (the church).**

As Jesus himself once put it:

*“The words I have spoken to you—they are full of spirit and life.” John 6:33 (NIV)*

... which is why the Apostle Paul would later write, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.”<sup>ii</sup>

And lucky for us, we *have* the words of Jesus – at least *some* of them, *enough* of them to know God and experience God in whatever situation we

find ourselves.

**Jesus also said ...**

*“It is actually best for you that I go away, because if I don’t, the Counselor [the Holy Spirit] won’t come. If I do go away, he will come because I will send him to you.”* *John*  
*16:5-7 (NLT)*

Friends, when you say “yes” to Jesus and invite Him into your life, that obviously doesn’t happen *physically*.

Instead, the Holy Spirit of God comes to dwell in and give life to your spirit, which is why – regardless of how it looks or feels at any moment in time – you are never alone.

**Finally, the Apostle Paul in one of his amazing metaphors writes that ...**

*You [collectively] are the body of Christ, and each one of you [individually] is a part of it.*  
*1 Corinthians 12:27 (NIV)*

If you're a Christian – if you believe in Jesus – you are part of a community where Jesus is present in all the other members.

And by being connected to them – by being part of a church where the Spirit of God is present, and the Word of Christ is preached and taught – you are in some way connecting with Jesus.

And you don't have to be alone.

So, that's how Jesus can be our *Emmanuel*. That's how he can be with us even though He is not “with us” – His words, His Spirit and His Body (the church).

## **Responding**



But here's the thing:

**God doesn't force His way into our lives. He only goes where people are ready to receive him.**

- That's why the angels announced the birth of the Messiah to shepherds instead of priests.
- And that's why Jesus was born in a manger instead of a palace.

The people in the palace and the people in the priesthood weren't open to receiving Him.

How about you? Are you open?

He wants to be with you, there's no question about that.

But when someone wants to be with you, you

must respond.

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Many years ago, I met the woman who is now my wife.

I spent a summer with her on a mission project and I knew almost immediately that I wanted to be “with” her long-term, as in married.

The only problem was that she lived in Texas, and I lived in the suburbs of Washington, D.C.

So, I did a really crazy thing.

After that summer ended, I entered her world. I took everything I owned, (which fit very easily into my 1969 Volkswagen), my entire life savings (of about \$400), and moved to Arlington, TX.

I had no job, no place to live (although I did wind up in a \$200/month dump) and no college degree (because I'd flunked out).

But there I was because I wanted to be with her. And she had to make a response.

At first, she really didn't appreciate my presence. In fact, the first night I was there she went out on a date with some other guy!

That's the way it is with some of us and God.

We don't really appreciate the fact that He wants to enter our world and so we try to avoid him. That's what some of you are doing.

Eventually, though, my wife said, "What is up with this guy? It really is kind of amazing what he's done – maybe I should check it out."

Obviously, she did.

And that's the response that some of you need to make today towards God. You should check it out.

If you live in this area and you don't have a church, I invite you to do that with us.

- You're the reason we started this church many years ago.
- You're the reason why we do church the way we do.

## **Candlelighting**

Of course, many of us in this room or watching online *have* responded to God.

In fact, just in this past year, you've experienced

## Emmanuel (God with us) because ...

- You said “yes” to Him and accepted Him as your savior.
- Or you got baptized.
- Or you started coming back to church.
- Or you decided to implement a specific teaching of Jesus
  - You forgave someone
  - You decided to *love* an enemy instead of hating them
  - You shared your faith with someone who doesn't believe
  - You prayed regularly for yourself and

others

- You gave money and/or time to the people and causes God loves.

Many of you, in some way, have taken a step with Jesus and the light of his presence has become known to you in a new way.

Just think about that for a minute.

So, what we're going to do in these next few moments to visualize what's happened not only in your life but in this congregation.

In just a minute, when the band plays the next song ...

- If the light has come on for you in some way since last Christmas, I invite you to come forward and light your candle ...

- And then go back and light the candles of those around you.
- And we'll spread the light until the whole room is filled
- And then, after that, we'll sing Silent Night together.

Let me pray and then we'll do that.

God, thank you for loving us so much that you would “come down” and be part of us.

And thank you that it wasn't just a one-time experience at a point in history but that so many of us have been able to experience that even now.

So, we offer up our candles to you in praise, thanksgiving, and worship.

You are our light and our Emmanuel.

Amen.

## **Closing Comments**

Ok, let's go ahead and blow out our candles.

Thanks for being here or watching online. I hope our time together has been encouraging to you in some way.

Now, I know it's the holidays and lots of us will be coming and going over the next week ...

**... so I want you to know what's happening here at NHCC.**

- This Sunday we're going to talk more about what it means to have a relationship with God in a message we're calling *The*



*Best Promise of All.*

- Then next Sunday is *Mystery Movie Sunday* in which I'm going to reach deep into the vault of the many movie messages I've done over the years.

I can't name the movie (or it wouldn't be a mystery) but I can tell you that it's sugary sweet in some places and a little spicy in others. A few critics thought it was a little too bland.

- Then, after that, on January 9<sup>th</sup>, we'll begin a series called *Made for More*: Becoming the person you were meant to be.

And if you don't have a church home, we'd love to have you join us for any or all of those services even if – *especially if* – you're not a "religious person" ...

... because, as I said earlier, you're the reason we started this church so many years ago.

Ok, let's stand together and let me pray for you.

Oh, make sure you pick up a goody bag for your family – ONE per household – on your way out.

Prayer:

I pray that as we go back into the world, we will know you better as our Emmanuel.

And I pray that we would take advantage of the ways You have made possible for that to happen.

- Through the words of Jesus
- Through the presence of your Spirit

- And through the church, which is His body.

Amen

And Merry Christmas!

Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Kim Walker Smith, *Love Came Down*

<sup>ii</sup> Colossians 3:16