

When was the last time you used the word “behold”? It’s not a word we often use. It may be because of the gravity of it. When I used it to introduce our Courageous Next Steps Board, my guess is you knew what was to follow was important. Maybe we don’t use it because we believe we have suitable replacements like “listen!”, “look!”, “dude!”, which was big in my youth, or “bro!”, which is the word of choice of my kids. But all of these pale in comparison to the force of “behold”. It is a word that urges you to lean in and take notice, because what is to follow is significant. It’s also a word used to tell the story of God.

In both the Old and New Testaments, through the Hebrew *hinneh* and the Greek *idou*, “behold” is a marker that ultimately tells the listener and reader “Pay careful attention to what is to follow. God is about to move!” And, this morning, as we begin our Christmas series entitled “Behold”, we’re going to see how God’s Word uses it to announce the identity and significance of a baby born in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. It is used to proclaim the magnificent answers to the question that old Christmas carol asks: What child is this?

And here’s our challenge. For many of us, we hear these same stories year after year and they may go stale. Familiarity breeds casualness. But the opportunity for us, whether we’re hearing them for the first time or the 50th time, is to **behold the story of Christmas afresh**. You see, “behold” is more than just listening, **it’s absorbing**, taking hold of what is said and letting it take root in our heart, because the words that follow are words that can change your life.

[Matthew 1:18-25] 18 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. 19 And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. 20 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. 21 She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” 22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 23 “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). 24 When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, 25 but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

Matthew tells us that a young Jewish man named Joseph is making plans to divorce his pregnant wife Mary. But he is about to behold an angelic announcement that says who this baby is and what he came to do. In doing so, the angel tells him that, in this baby, **[SLIDE] God is with us in order to save us.**

This baby to be born is God himself. He is conceived by the Holy Spirit and he shall be called Immanuel, which means “God with us”. The magnificent truth of Christmas is that the infinite God of the universe stepped out of eternity, took on flesh, and came to us as a baby. He is God, he is human, and he is with us.

It is often said the Bible never claims that Jesus is God. That idea is proven false in the first chapter of the first Gospel. Every New Testament writer makes clear explicitly and implicitly

that that's exactly who Jesus is, as does Jesus himself through his claims of equality with the Father, forgiving sins (only the offended one can forgive), and the miracles he performed. Jesus is God. The rest of the New Testament hinges on this fact. If it's not true, the rest can't be either. But if it's true, the rest is true, and that changes everything.

On his death bed, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, said, of all the wonderful truths found in God's Word, "God with us" is the best. That staggering truth is worthy to be introduced with a "Behold!" It should stop us in our tracks. It should make us marvel. The one who is infinitely greater and transcendent than all creation has come to be with us.

I remember at my first job in Dallas there was an Exec VP who took a liking to me. He didn't have to. I could do nothing for him. But he at times sought me out, taught me phrases in Latin, and his presence was meaningful. Have you ever had someone of stature pay attention to you when they didn't have to? Take that, multiply it by infinity, add one, and that's the reality of Christmas. Just trying to illustrate this seems irreverent because there is simply nothing like this in all of history. It is a movement by God that, as Tim Keller says, "...is the universe-sundering, history-altering, life-transforming, paradigm-shattering event in history."

The angel also said what he came to do. The name Jesus means "Yahweh is salvation" or "the Lord saves". This baby has come to save, but what he has come to save us from is significant. Matthew says all of this has come to pass in order to fulfill what was said by the prophet Isaiah. If you go back to Isaiah 7, you'll see the prophet is talking to King Ahaz when he says this. Israel has split, the northern kingdom has allied with Aram and is threatening to attack the southern kingdom of Judah. So God sends Isaiah to the king to say he will not be harmed by them because God is with them, and the sign he gives as assurance is a child born who will be called Immanuel. This child is a picture of the one who was to be born 700 years later, but Matthew's Jewish readers may have assumed this Immanuel also means the defeat of Israel's enemy Rome.

But the angel says Jesus did not come to save Israel from yet another geopolitical enemy. Jesus came to save us all from a much worse, and much more deadly enemy. He came to save us from our sins. The Bible tells us the wages of sin is death. We read of judgment, condemnation, weeping and gnashing of teeth, lakes of fire, eternal torment, but they often diminish what I believe is the greatest cost of our sin.

[SLIDE: Isaiah 59:1-2] Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; 2 but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.

The greatest consequence of sin is, ultimately, God *not* with us. It separates us from God. Jesus came to save us from sin and from death, but he also came to save us back to God. We are incapable of doing it ourselves, so he came to us as a babe in a manger. That means God is not only with us in order to save us, **God saves us in order to be with us.**

Here's a happy Christmas thought for you: Christmas is a great reminder that we are helpless. It declares "Behold: You can't make your way back to God." You may recognize that separation and strive to make up that gap, but Christmas says it's hopeless. If it was possible, Christmas

wouldn't be necessary. The Holy Spirit wouldn't have had to conceive a child in Mary's womb. Jesus wouldn't have had to take on flesh, live the perfect life, and die on the cross. God could have just sent a road map with a set of instructions and said, "see you when you get here". He could have told us to follow a path instead of a person. And that would make Christianity like all other religions; a list of rules to follow, good works to perform, to make your way to God. But Christmas says that's just not possible, so God comes to be with us to save us and saves us in order to be with us. Only by faith we can receive this salvation. When we do, the implications reach far beyond the town of Bethlehem 2,000 years ago.

God with us means we can know him and live for him.

I can read a biography about any famous person and know about them. I can read the Bible and know about Jesus. But the fact that Jesus is a person means we can have a relationship with him and know him. We can love, communicate with, learn from, be comforted by, lament to, and lean on Immanuel. We can also experience the love our infinite God has for us and know he gives it to us unconditionally. God with us means you are fully his, fully accepted, and nothing can separate you from that. That relationship also means your life can be lived for him.

Martha and I got away for a few days recently and, before we left, we gave some final instructions to our boys. When you leave and give some final words, they are usually very important, and you want them to be remembered. Jesus was no different.

[Matthew 28:19-20] "19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

The last thing Jesus said before he ascended to heaven was the first thing said about him before he was born. "I am with you always". I am Immanuel. If you are disciple whose life has existed only between Galilee and Jerusalem, the command to go change the world could be daunting. You want to know God is with you. If you are Joseph and planning on going in one direction by quietly divorcing Mary but are told to stay with her to be her husband and to be the father of her child, even though you know it means public shame, you want to know God is with you.

And if you are in Dallas, and you believe that you matter to God, that your life has meaning, and he wants to use it for purposes greater than yourself, you want to know God is with you. Thankfully Jesus promises he is Immanuel until the very end. His presence gives us the confidence we can fulfill his purpose for our life and the power to do so. His presence gives us the courage to make the hard decisions he's calling us to. His presence means we can keep going because we are never alone. And when we hit a roadblock...

God with us means we can run to him. The life we live with him and for him will not be without its difficulties, but because he came to us, we can go to him.

[Hebrews 4:15-16] 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

This baby to be born is fully God and fully man. That means he will have the full human experience. He'll been tempted, know grief, discouragement, rejection, and loneliness, yet he will not deviate from the path the Father has him on. That is good news for us.

I received so much support from you all when my dad died earlier this year. Some of the most meaningful and comforting conversations began with one of you saying, "I remember when I lost my dad...". You had been there. You knew what I was going through, and you were with me as I went through it. What you did for me is what Immanuel does for us.

God with us means Jesus lived a life and went through all the things we go through. He can relate to our temptations and trials, he has compassion for our struggles, and we can draw near to him to be with him as he pours out his grace and mercy to help us in our time of need. We don't have to clean ourselves up first. There is no condemnation to be experienced. We can run to him just as we are and receive the help that he gives. This is possible because he is with us.

I want to commend the 40 or so of you who have experienced God with us in this way through our STEPS recovery program. Because God is with you, you had the courage to take what has been holding you back to the throne of grace, and I'm confident you found a sympathetic and compassionate God who poured out his grace and mercy to help you overcome. You may still be in process on it, but do not keep to yourself how Immanuel changed your life through that ministry. He has shown you that you matter to him, that he accepts you just as you are, and I pray you have been given freedom to move forward to live the life he has for you.

God with us means we will always be with him. Jesus promised to be with us to the end of the age...but what happens after that?

[Revelation 21:3] 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God."

He is Immanuel in Bethlehem. He is Immanuel now. And he will be Immanuel for all of eternity. We oftentimes call this time of year Advent. It's a season of preparation and anticipation as we celebrate the fulfilled promise of the birth of our Savior. But it's also a time of expectant preparation and anticipation for when he comes back to make all things new. Christmas is a season of peace and hope because we know how the story ends. What Jesus accomplished in his first coming makes what he will accomplish in his second possible. He was born to secure our eternity, and we will be with him forever.

How is your life different because God is with you?

The world once again did not disappoint this week. After setting aside a day to give thanks for all we have, it was followed up by a day where many acted as if they have nothing. Black Friday was full of stories of stampedes, fights, gun scares, and people leaving shopping centers on stretchers. And it is a reminder for us that we have a decision to make. Which of the Christmas presents/presence is most important to us; the ones under the tree, or the presence of Immanuel?

We all know the right answer. I struggle myself, not as much with gifts, but with the sentiment of the season. I love everything about Christmas! None of those things are bad, but materialism and sentimentalism can take our focus away from...the reason for the season. So my challenge to you this week is to recognize the times God with you makes a difference.

Take note when you're reminded in your loneliness that you're never alone, when your worry is extinguished by a peace that surpasses all understanding, when you overcome temptation because he leads you out in that moment, when the world tries to define you but you know he calls you beloved, or when you simply experience the intimate joy of being still and knowing he is your Lord. I believe if we do that, it will change the way you experience Christmas and encounter Jesus during this time. our hearts will be focused on him and the rest will fall in line behind it.

Above all, remember this: **Christmas means God wants to be with you.** He loves you so much that he came to make that happen. Don't just take note of that. Behold it, let your heart absorb it and be changed because of it. Immanuel has come.