

God With Us

A long time ago (like, when I was in college!), I was part of a team that travelled to, and worked in Scotland for about 4 months, during the summer months. Home base for 2 months was in the highlands in the far north on a couple dozen acres of a sheep-herder's homestead in the region of Aviemore. One day we had several hours of free time and our host family told us about a hike not too far away with amazing views and wandering sheep and perhaps a couple surprises when we got up there. I wanted to go but my teammates didn't. So, we all went our ways and decided to meet back at a central location in 4 or 5 hours. And off I went. And it was, indeed, amazing.

When I got toward the top of this great hill, there was an old sheep-herder's cabin up there, made out of stone, and there were sheep, and that's all. The cabin, the sheep and me. I sat down on a grassy area, and took everything in: the sweet smell of heather, the gentle breeze, the blue sky, and as far as the eye could see, to the left and to the right, was nothing but sheer beauty. There was a lake that stretched off into the horizon. One of the surprises was the ruins of an ancient castle off in the distance. It was quiet; not a sound but the rustling of a gentle breeze and the occasional bleating of a sheep.

And I sat there, enjoying the beauty of the moment. A moment when time seems to stop and everything is so real and alive and vivid. And I thought to myself, at that time, this is the most beautiful place I have ever seen. And... I never felt so alone.

I wished that my friends back home could be with me. I wished that my teammates had come along, or that my family could see this. In the midst of incredible beauty, I all of the sudden felt alone, and really wanted someone to just be there with me and share this moment. And this, from someone who normally doesn't mind being alone.

As I reflect on that moment—and other moments like it—it reminds me that this is the way God made us. When we experience the big & beautiful moments of life, we are created in such a way that we don't want to spend them alone. We always want someone to *be with us* at the big & beautiful moments of life because their presence has a way of magnifying the beauty and the enjoyment of an event.

For example, a graduation. No student wants to be alone. They want parents and family to be *with them* at such a significant time. If we're celebrating

an accomplishment, or receiving an award, the first thing we want to do is tell someone about it! And share in our joy.

We want someone to be with us in the big and beautiful moments.

And God has made us in such a way that we also want someone to be with us during the *bad moments of life* too. When you have a death in the family, for example, you want to have loved ones there with you. No one wants to cry alone. Sometimes we *need* to cry alone, but eventually you want to be with others when you are grieving.

Or, you want others around you when you are sick and you can't take care of yourself very well. When you are sick or hurting, you want somebody with you.

That is the way God made us. In the big & beautiful moments of life and in the bad and hard moments of life, we want and need someone to be with us.

Further, not only do we have an inner desire for our *loved ones* to be with us during the big moments and bad moments of life, we want to know *that God is with us* as well. We want to have God with us at the big and beautiful moments, the bad moments and all the everyday moments in between.

I believe it is our deepest desire to know *that God is with us*, to know that we are not alone in the world. Our deepest desire is to have God with us to guide us, give us wisdom, to strengthen us at all times, but especially at the critical times of life.

Christmas is that season where God *once again* makes his promise to us: A child is born! God's very name is Emmanuel, which means, God is with us. God's name reveals God's character, and purpose, his way of operating in this world and with people. And it says: His name shall be called, Emmanuel. God with us. Our desire is to know that God is with us. And... *God's* desire is to *be* with us. What a wonderful arrangement!

The question for many people, is not: is there a God? The question for most people is: *Does God care? Is God good? Is God truly with me?* Those are the bigger questions.

The story of the whole Bible is God convincing people that he is faithful to his promise to be with us. And God was faithful to his promise of coming to earth to be among us, and Jesus was born. Jesus was named Emmanuel, and his name reveals who he is: God with us! Jesus is God's living promise that we are not

alone in the world, but that God is with us in big and beautiful moments, the bad moments, and the everyday moments.

I love the story about two dear older ladies, who were sisters. I want you to imagine two ladies, both in their young 80s. They had been each other's best friends all their lives and when they both became widows, they decided one would move in with the other. So there they were, living in North Dakota. They were not only living in North Dakota, they were living on a farm in North Dakota. It was not only a farm in North Dakota, it was a dumpy farm in North Dakota. It was the dumpiest farm you have ever seen in North Dakota. The chicken coop was falling down. The barn was about to collapse. The rusted machinery was falling apart, and the sisters themselves were falling apart!

But these two seasoned saints were as tough as nails. They had weathered every storm for the past 80+ years and they were tough. Well, it so happened that a nephew came to visit them one fall day from the big city of Minneapolis. And he took out his camera to take a picture of his weather-worn aunts, with the falling-down barn and the chicken coop and the rusted machinery all in the background. The aunts just stood there, strait and stoic for the picture (like the good German Lutherans that they were). The nephew took the picture and later

sent them a copy. The aunts just loved that photograph. They loved it so much they decided to use it for their Christmas card that year. At the top of their picture they put the words *Merry Christmas*, in bold, black letters. And at the bottom of the picture, also in big bold letters were the words: *God is with us in our mess*.

That is the message of Christmas: that God is with us... in our mess. Because that is the only way that life is found, right? There is no place you can go where life is not messed up. Do any of you know of any place in the world where it is not messed up? If you know of such a place, would you please tell me and I will tell others, and we will go there, and then... that place will then be messed up! There is no place where we can go where life is not messed up to some degree. If you stay in a place long enough, or with a friend, or a family long enough, you will discover the hidden or not so hidden messes.

The message of Christmas is not that God protects us from the messes of life. It is not that we are somehow insulated from the messes of life, but rather *in* the very messiness of life—in our messy families, and our messy workplaces, our messy churches, and in our messed up society, God is still Emmanuel, God is still

with us, giving us strength and understanding and wisdom and love, so we can live well in this messy world.

God is with us... in our mess. Jesus was born in a messy place, if you think about it. He entered right into it. And he died in a *very* messy place. That's the real Jesus. Jesus came into a messed-up world, and went straight to the messiest places, hung out with messy people, and let everyone know that God was with them, and that God loved them unconditionally.

It's good to know that the message of Christmas is that God is with us in our messes. It is good to know that God does not come to us only if we are good or have first gotten our act together. No, God is already with us. *We cannot not* be in God's presence—or God in our presence. As the old children's song goes, "There is no spot where God is not."

Those who make New Year's resolutions often resolve to change a habit, do something to better themselves. How about this, not necessarily as a new year's resolution, but a simple and helpful spiritual practice: every day claim that God is with you. Every morning acknowledge as you begin your day: God is with me. And every evening claim it, at the close of the day: God was with me in all things today, whether I felt it or not. There's a great opening line from Psalm 92:1: "*It is*

good to give thanks to the Lord; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night." These are the great book ends of each day: to begin the day declaring God's love, and end each day by saying, "God is faithful; God was with me." Do this every morning and evening see what difference *that* makes.

Please pray with me: Loving God, as you came to earth in the stillness of night, enter our lives this night. Overcome darkness with the light of Christ's presence, that we may clearly see the way to walk, and the hope to hang onto. With singing angels let us rejoice in your love and saving help. Through Jesus Christ, whose birth we celebrate. Amen.