

**“The Presence of Christ”  
(Matthew 1:23)  
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**Introduction:**

I think it's been pretty well noted that it's during the busiest time of the year that people experience the most loneliness. Isn't that strange? During a time that's supposed to be about family and friends, about people getting together, about joy and laughter, people are at their loneliest. Perhaps some of us here are dreading the Christmas season because it heightens your sense of being alone. It may be because your family is away and you won't be able to see them, or perhaps because you don't have the financial means to buy gifts, or in comparison to all the cheerful people near you, you just seem like a dud compared to their excitement. Others may choose to just get hammered to numb their way through the holidays. But what if that's not your thing?

I think loneliness is a big deal these days and it's not just an issue for singles. You can be married or dating. You can be surrounded by friends. But you can still be lonely. And we do a lot of stuff to make sure we're not alone. We fill our lives with music and noise and entertainment and work and all of that, perhaps to mask our feelings of loneliness.

Well, first of all I don't think loneliness is always bad. Jesus, during his life, often sought out solitude and retreated from a busy ministry schedule. Loneliness can be good. Being alone with God should be a regular part of our existence. This intentional loneliness is called solitude.

Also, all Christians at one time or another will feel alone. The bible refers to us pilgrims, sojourners and aliens. We're migrants, vagabonds, gypsies in life's journey. And it's because we never feel totally at home here. We feel out of place when coworkers share dirty jokes and talk coarsely. We feel out of place when everyone's pursuing the almighty dollar and we're just trying to live in simplicity. So it's not always bad to be alone. It helps us long for heaven.

But sometimes our feelings of being alone are a call from God. I think Blaise Pascal the ancient mathematician and Christian was correct when he said “*There is a God shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus.*” And it is that longing for the Presence of God that causes us to feel alone. Think about it. Peel away the noise of our lives. Turn off the ipods, the car stereos, turn off the TVs and computers, temporarily remove yourself from the busyness of work and family, and discern what it is you truly long for. It is God.

God, knowing this to be true with all humankind, decided to do something about it. That's the Christmas message.

Let's see what he did in today's passage.

*<sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. <sup>20</sup> 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."<sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."<sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:*

*<sup>23</sup> "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us).<sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife,<sup>25</sup> but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.*

The bookends of the gospel of Matthew speak about the presence of Christ with us. This is what God did for all of humankind,. John Stott states in his book *Basic Christianity* that three types of alienation resulted from the sin of mankind. It is alienation from God, alienation from man, and alienation with ourselves. And because of that alienation we not only feel alone, we are alone. Our relationships often go sour. And God is not Immanuel, he is not with us, because of sin and the resulting alienation. That's why God sent Jesus, to solve the alienation and loneliness problem.

So the book of Matthew begins with the birth of Christ--a special moment in the history of the world when God became a human being. In all that it meant to be human, Jesus embodied all of that humanity. And as a part of that full embodiment of humanity, he entered the world not as a fully developed adult, which he could have done, but it would have opened up many more problems that would have questioned the nature of his humanity. So instead, Jesus entered the world as a supernaturally conceived egg, zygote, embryo, fetus, newborn, infant, toddler, child, pre-teen, teenager, and adult.

And so the beginning of Matthew tells us that Jesus' name is to be Immanuel, which means God with us. Now this is phenomenal because up to this point God dwelt with his people only in a spiritual form or by some physical manifestation such as fire or a cloud as was in the times of Moses. We all just read that this past week in our bible readings, didn't we? In the birth of Christ, God for the first time became man. (Philippians 2).

6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

And he became a human for many reasons, right? To ensure our forgiveness. For salvation from God's wrath and punishment. To give us new life. So that we could have peace with God. Incredible accomplishments and benefits for us. But another reason he came to earth was to be with us. Did you know that? One of the reasons Jesus came to earth in the form of a living, breathing, human being was so that he could be with us. How do we know that? Well, isn't that what Immanuel means? God with us? He left heaven, came to earth, took on a human form in order to be with us. Do you truly believe that in the core of your being? Well you may believe it in your head but perhaps not so much in your heart.

Look to the life that he lived, especially the three years of his public ministry. Sure there were times of solitude and there were times when he withdrew to avoid crowds, but a huge percentage of his public ministry was shoulder-to-shoulder, face-to-face, sweat-on-sweat, person-to-person ministry. He taught and performed miracles in public places among the people and for the people.

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And of course, well documented is the extended laser-focused time he spent with the twelve disciples. He lived out this kind of life because he is Immanuel, God with us.

But what about now? Jesus is physically/geographically/locationally in heaven, seated at the right hand of God. So is He with us now, if He's in heaven? The answer is yes. In Matthew 28:20, the other bookend of this book, Jesus tells his followers,

"And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

So moments before he ascends into heaven, he gives them this incredible promise. But how is that, if he is going to heaven and will physically no longer be with us, how can he be with us? The answer can be found in a couple of places. One is in John 15:26.

"But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me."

The other is in Acts 1:8.

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

The way that the presence of Christ remains with us today is through the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. You and I are called temples of the Holy Spirit because that is where God resides (1 Cor. 6:19). And the Holy Spirit is also called the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9). So all of God, in all three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit resides in all of his children. God, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Immanuel.

So how do we, not only during the Christmas season but all the time, experience Immanuel?

1. The most important ingredient is Faith. Faith is having the assurance, the confidence, believing something to be true about God or about the promises he has for us. And that assurance is so strong, it determines the way you and I live out our lives. Faith is absolutely crucial to experience God's presence. We mustn't bank on your feelings. Believe in your heart that God is there.
2. Practice the Presence of God in your daily life. Brother Lawrence, was a monk that lived in the 1500's and he wrote what is now considered a spiritual classic, a book entitled ***The Practice of the Presence of God***. And in this book he teaches us how to experience God's presence in all the different areas of our lives. So here are a couple of suggestions he makes.
  - Consider all the daily stuff that we do just as precious and valuable as the devotional time we spend with God. So this is what one person said about Brother Lawrence, "That with him the set times of prayer were not different from other times." And do you know what his "other times" were? He was the monastery cook. He was real life Nacho Libre. In the cutting up of meat and vegetables, in the clanging of pots and pans, he was worshipping God. So for us, don't place a higher value on the devotional time than the other parts of your life and thus make an unnatural segregation between these things. All of what we do is divine.

- In all of the daily stuff that we do. Work, study, family...make it a habit to lift up a prayer of dependence. "Lord, without your help, I cannot do this in a manner that would please you. Help me."
- Focus on your love for God, not your duty, not just your repentance.

There are more, but these are just a few. This Christmas, each of us can experience Immanuel. It doesn't matter if you haven't ever met God or if you've been a Christian all your life. If you accept Jesus, Immanuel into your hearts, he is there to meet you, to be with you and he will never forsake you.

