

The Birth of Jesus Christ

A sermon preached by Theodore S. Atkinson, pastor of the Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the fourth Sunday of Advent, December 21, 1986. Scripture lessons: Isaiah 7:10-17; Psalm 24; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This week we lost three members of our church, Marion Fox, Ralph Kirk and Hilda Thompson died. I visited each of them, had times of prayer and read scripture, but I was angry with myself that I was not there at the actual time of their death. I wanted to be there with them and with their families.

But in the midst of these self-incriminations God spoke to me through our Scripture Lesson, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, whose name shall be called Emmanuel: (which means, God with us)." God himself seemed to whisper in my ear, "It's alright that you weren't there. I was there just as I promised! I was with Marion. I was with Ralph. I was with Hilda. I was there at the beginning when they were conceived. I was there when they were born. I claimed them for my very own in baptism and promised to wash away their sins by the blood of Jesus. I was there when they professed their faith in Christ. I was with them when they made their journey through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. I've always been with them, even when they didn't know it.

Emmanuel; God with us. Not some vague mystical feeling of the presence of an eternal being, but God in the flesh. That's the difference between the friend who says to us when we're in some real trouble: "I'll be thinking of you," and the one who comes alongside and sees us through. A thousand religions offer some kind of assurance that "out there" or "up there" or "in here" some divine Being is thinking of us. Only the Christmas story tells of the God who comes alongside to see us through. And even

this morning we are in the presence of one who knows what it is to be surrounded by powers of hell, to be the victim of cruelty and hate, to be deserted by all his friends, to die alone, and to go through the ultimate agony of being apparently forsaken by the heavenly Father. This is the "God with us" we celebrate at Christmas, and this is the "God with us" with whom we travel into the unpredictable adventures of a new year.

So often the reality of that doesn't sink in. So often we feel alone. My sister gave us a poem entitled *The Footprints of God*. You've probably heard it before. It's a little sentimental, but there's real truth in it. It goes like this:

In deepest sleep one night I dreamed
That on the beach I walked.
God was by my side each step
And quietly we talked.
Then on the sky my life was flashed;
The visions all serene.
~~Two sets of footprints in the sand~~
Were there in every scene.
But then I noticed in some scenes
Of suffering, pain, and strife...
Just a single set of footprints
At the worst times of my life.
"God... you said you'd stay by me
In good times and in bad...
Why then did you leave me
Each time my life was sad?"
"My precious child," God answered,
"When your life had pain, I knew;
The *single* set of footprints
Were the times I carried you."

At the end of Matthew's Gospel the Risen Christ, Emmanuel, appears to his disciples and says, "Lo, I am with you always." Emmanuel is God with us, now and always, even when we don't realize it. Even when we don't believe it. Even when we don't feel his presence. I've been reading *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, by C.S. Lewis to Andrew. There's one place where the little girl Lucy is alone in a frightenfully huge mansion. She's reading a magical book. She comes across a spell *to make hidden*

things visible. She reads it through to make sure of all the hard words and then says it aloud. As soon as she says it she hears something coming down the hall; the sound of soft, but heavy footfall. She's frightened and turns to look when she sees *Aslan*, the Lion (Aslan is like Jesus who is also called the Lion of the Tribe of Judah). Lucy cries out, "Oh, Aslan, I'm so glad that you've finally come." "I've been here all the time," he said, "but you have just made me visible." Jesus, is God with us even when we don't see him. And so often we fail to make him visible because we do not participate regularly in those means of grace which make him visible; prayer, the scriptures, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the regular times of worship with God's people.

There's no better gift I can give you this Christmas than the gift of being able to see the one who is called Emmanuel, God with us; the one who says, "Lo, I am with you always." I can wish you health, happiness, and prosperity, but I can't promise that you'll certainly have them. I *can*, however, deliver you the promise that comes in the name of Jesus, the promise of his presence in word, sacrament, prayer and church. Merry Christmas and the Lord, Emmanuel, be with you.

Let us pray: Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitations, and open our eyes to your unseen presence; that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming today, tomorrow, and on the world's last night, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.