

“God With Us” (Christmas Collection)

This selection of Christmas sermons includes three messages. The first is designed for the Sunday before Christmas and focuses on the message, “Do not be afraid.” The second, an adaptation of a Leo Tolstoy Christmas story, is a devotional for Christmas Eve, and reminds us that when we welcome others with compassion, we welcome Christ. The third is for the Sunday after Christmas, and focuses on our disappointment when our Christmas expectations are not met.

1. Christmas Fear (Luke 1:13, 1:30, 2:10, Matthew 1:18-23)
2. A Christmas Dream (Luke 2:1-20, Matthew 25:31-40)
3. Disappointed with Christmas (Matthew 1:22-23, 11:2-6)

“God with Us” (part one)
Christmas Fear (For the week before Christmas)
(Luke 1:13, 1:30, 2:10, Matthew 1:18-23)

A few days ago I went to the online encyclopedia called Wikipedia and looked up their list of phobias—things people are afraid of. It listed familiar fears like acrophobia—the fear of heights, claustrophobia—the fear of being closed in, and anachnophobia—the fear of spiders. But it also listed phobias I’ve never heard of, including the fear of bathing, flowers, gravity, hair, and the color orange. Hopefully if you have that phobia you are not a UT fan. There is also a fear of computers, of being out of cell phone range, of balloons, and bad breath. Also on the list were fears of fish, buttons, puppets, the number four, and cheese. Also included were fears of books, household appliances, and dolls. Several religious fears made the phobia list. For example, theophobia—the fear of religion, ecclesiophobia—the fear of churches (I know several pastors who have that phobia!), Christianophobia—the fear of Christians, along with the fear of the number 666, heaven, and hell. There is even a fear of phobias called phobophobia. Finally, there is panphobia, which is the fear of everything.

Fear abounds in our world. Two weeks ago, the President of the United States went on TV and challenged Americans not to give in to fear. He was speaking about the fear of terrorism that has become acute again after the horrible attacks in Paris and California. The same night the President encouraged us to resist terrorism fear, I was at Dogwood Park for “Christmas In the Park.” I’m sure some of you were there. We had a massive Christmas tree, Santa Claus, and a mass choir of over a hundred children from various local school choirs. In attendance were the pastors of about 30 community churches who took turns reading the Christmas story, along with thousands of people gathered in the park. As I stood near the microphone, getting ready to read my part of the Christmas story, for one brief moment I had a twinge of fear. I thought—if a person wanted to engage in a terrorist attack in Tennessee, it would be hard to find a better venue. But the fear immediately dissipated. After all, this is Cookeville, Tennessee, hardly on the list of likely terrorist attacks in America. But the fact that I even thought about it for a few seconds says a lot about where we are as nation right now.

Maybe it’s just me, but it seems like fear abounds in America today. And not just fear of terrorism. Many other fears exist as well. For example, fear about the economy. Or fear about climate change. Or fear about crime. And the list goes on and on. Of course, everybody experiences fear from time to time. Just a few days ago a person dropped in my office to talk

with me. They had a major surgery scheduled in a few days, felt afraid, and wanted me to pray with them. As a pastor, I talk to fearful people all the time. People fearful about their health. People fearful about their children. People fearful about their job. People fearful about their finances. People fearful about their marriage. People fearful about their death. Fear is a common visitor to all people. Even during the Christmas season, when we try to be jolly, and we listen to joyful music, and we go to parties, and we decorate our homes, and we smile and laugh—fear is never far away. Even at Christmas, fear is all around us, and fear is often within us.

That was certainly true at the first Christmas. I know we have romantic notions about Mary, Joseph, Jesus, Bethlehem and the manger. But in truth—it was a fearful time. The world that Jesus was born into was a world of poverty, extortion, evil rulers, war, cruelty, brutal military occupiers, and terrors of all kinds. There was plenty of fear to go around during that first Christmas. Maybe that's why the Christmas stories in the Bible talk about fear—not once or twice or even three times—but four different times. In Luke 1, God said to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, “Do not be afraid.” A little further in Luke 1, God said to Mary, the mother of Jesus, “Do not be afraid.” In Luke 2 God came to the shepherds and said, “Do not be afraid.” In Matthew 1 God said to Joseph, the father of Jesus, “Do not be afraid.” Jesus was born during a fearful time. And Zechariah, Mary, Joseph and the shepherds—they all faced fearful circumstances. So on that first Christmas God said—four times—“Do not be afraid.”

But how is that possible? How can Christmas alleviate our fears? We find the answer in the story of Joseph. Joseph just discovered Mary was pregnant. They were not yet married. It was a scandal. Joseph felt fearful. What was he going to do? He and Mary were poor young kids in a tough world expecting an unplanned baby. Joseph was fearful and rightly so. So God came to Joseph in a dream and said “Joseph, do not be afraid.” God told Joseph that Mary's child was a special child, conceived by the Holy Spirit. God told Joseph this child was going to be the Messiah. And God told Joseph this child would be called “Immanuel” which means, “God is with us.” In short, Joseph was told not to fear because God would be with him. And when God is with us, we can face anything that comes our way—anything. That's what David expressed in Psalm 23. He said, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.” And when God is with us, we can face our deepest fears with courage, and with faith, and with hope.

A few years ago I received a Christmas letter from a United Methodist pastor. For the past several years, his wife had struggled with a serious strain of cancer. During that particular Christmas season, things looked bleak for her. It was likely her last Christmas. No doubt it was a

fearful time for them—the most fearful time of their life. In the midst of that struggle, this pastor and his wife sent out their annual Christmas letter. I saved the letter. This is what it said:

“We wish for you a holiday and a new year filled with the remembrance that Jesus is the light of all people, and that faith casts out fear. Four times in the nativity story we hear the words, “do not be afraid.” Luke 1:13 says “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayers have been heard.” Luke 1:30 says “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” Matthew 1:20 says, “Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.” In Luke 2:10 God says to the shepherds, “Do not be afraid, for I bring you good news.” The Light of Christ casts out the darkness of terrorism, illness, storms, poverty, loneliness and fear, giving us hope, love, joy and faith.”

This couple was facing the most fearful time of their life. And yet they were able to affirm faith in Immanuel—the God who is always with us—giving us hope and courage and strength even in the face of fear.

I don't know all the fears you face today. But the good news of Christmas is that we are not alone in our fear. Why? Because Immanuel has come. Through Jesus Christ, and through the community of Christ—God is with us. And because God is with us, we can face our fears with courage and with hope. Thanks be to God. Amen.

“God with Us” (part two)
A Christmas Dream (A Christmas Eve devotional)
(Luke 2:1-20, Matthew 25:31-40)

Tonight, for our Christmas Eve devotional, I want to tell you an old Christmas story from Russia. It’s an adaptation of a short story by Leo Tolstoy. The story takes place many years ago, just a few days before Christmas. The story is about a shoemaker named Charles. Charles lived in a tiny apartment which doubled as a shoe shop in a large city in Russia. Charles was a busy shoemaker, for he was an honest man and a fine craftsman. Charles lived alone, for his beloved wife had died years earlier, leaving him grief stricken and lonely. But during the years that followed her death, Charles began to read his Bible daily and attend his church faithfully, which brought him great comfort. He grew close to God and Christian friends, and his faith brought him meaning and joy.

One night, a few days before Christmas, while Charles slept, he dreamed that Jesus came to visit him in his little apartment and shoe shop. Jesus said to him, “Charles, be on the lookout tomorrow, for I am going to come visit you.” Suddenly Charles was fully awake. Was this really the voice of Jesus? Is it possible Jesus would visit his shop the next day? He was so excited he tossed and turned the rest of the night.

The next morning Charles rose before dawn, prayed, heated the stove, put on some cabbage soup, and sat down at his bench by the window to work. This morning, however, his mind was not on shoes. He wondered about his dream. Was it just a strange dream, or was it possible Jesus would visit him that day?

All morning long, Charles’ eyes looked out the window of his little shop. As he looked he saw old Stephen, the janitor at his building, clearing away the snow on the sidewalk. Charles noticed that Stephen was struggling to shovel the snow. He thought, “A man that old and frail has no business shoveling heavy snow.” Tapping on the window, Charles shouted to the old man, “Come in here and get warm! I have some tea ready.” Moments later Stephen shuffled into the small room. “Thank you,” he said, “my bones are aching.” Charles poured Stephen a glass of hot tea and placed a sugar cube in it. The old man drank down the glass rapidly, and nodded his thanks to his host. “Have another,” Charles said, reaching for the teapot. Stephen drank the second cup, more slowly this time. Finally he finished, and he thanked Charles again.

Charles was pleased as the old man went outside, but he was also a bit disappointed. It was already late morning, and Jesus had not yet come. He went back to his workbench, and worked on a pair of shoes. About an hour later, Charles looked again out his window, and he saw a woman, poorly dressed, standing against the wall with her back to the wind. She had a child in her arms, and she was trying to wrap the child in a thin and ragged blanket. Opening the door, Charles said to the young woman, "Why don't you wrap your baby in here where it is warm." A moment later, the woman stood by the stove telling her story. Her husband had been shipped off to war by the military eight months before and hadn't been heard from since. She had a job as a cook but had recently been laid off, so she was out looking for a new job. Charles asked, "Don't you have any warm clothes?" She said, "I sold my last shawl yesterday, we needed food." Charles opened up a closet in the shop where a woman's winter coat was hanging. Handing it to the woman he said, "It belonged to my wife. I don't need it anymore." She said, "Oh no, I couldn't." Charles said, "Yes, you must take it. It would make my wife so happy for you to have it." He then gave her a bowl of his cabbage soup. While she ate, he found a warm blanket for her baby. She thanked him with tears in her eyes. As she walked out the door Charles gave her a loaf of bread and a large smoked sausage. When she was gone Charles felt pleased that he had been able to assist her in some small way. Yet he also felt anxious, for it was early afternoon, and Jesus had not yet made his visit.

As the afternoon wore on, Charles found it difficult to keep his mind on his work. He often peered out the window, wondering if Jesus was really going to come and visit him. Late in the afternoon, Charles saw a boy looking through his shop window at all the new shoes. The boy, dressed in rags, was obviously very poor. Charles noticed that his shoes were full of holes and literally falling apart. So Charles walked outside and said, "Come in here young man and we'll get you a new pair of shoes." The boy sheepishly said, "Sir, I have no money for shoes." Charles said, "Don't worry about the money, it's Christmas!" So the boy came into the shop and Charles measured his feet and gave him a brand new pair of shoes. Beaming, the boy thanked him over and over again, and then finally left the shop. Charles watched the boy skip down the street, full of joy at his good fortune. As he went back inside he felt good that he had been able to help the young boy. But, he also felt sad because it was now late in the day, and Jesus had not come and obviously was not going to come.

That evening, the shoemaker put his tools away, swept the floor, and set his table for dinner. When he finished his cabbage soup, Charles picked up his Bible and sat in his chair by the lamp. He felt rather foolish for believing that Jesus had spoken to him the night before. How silly to think Jesus would visit his shop. It was just a strange dream, that's all, Charles said to himself.

His Scripture reading that evening took him to the 25th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. In that passage Jesus said to his followers, “I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was naked and you clothed me.” When Jesus’ followers heard those words they looked surprised and they said, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger, and welcome you, or naked and clothe you?” And the king will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.’”

Suddenly, images of old Stephen the janitor, and the soldier’s wife with the baby, and the poor boy with worn out shoes flashed across Charles’ mind. Charles realized that his dream had not deceived him. Jesus had truly come to him that day. And Charles had truly received him.

“God with Us” (part three)
Disappointed With Christmas (For the week after Christmas)
(Matthew 1:22-23, 11:2-6)

I recently heard a man share the following story from his childhood. When he was an eight year old boy, all he wanted for Christmas that year was Rock 'em Sock 'em Robots. If you are not familiar with Rock 'em Sock 'em Robots, it's a game of dueling robots. The goal is to knock off the head of your opponent. The man told me that through the years there have been several models of this toy. But in his opinion, the best version ever made was the original one that came out in 1964, when he was eight. The toy was heavily advertised on TV, so every boy in America, including him, wanted one. He wrote Santa Claus a letter several weeks before Christmas, telling him that he wanted Rock 'em Sock 'em Robots. When his Mom took him to the mall before Christmas, and he sat in Santa's lap and Santa asked him, “What do you want for Christmas?” he replied: “Rock 'em Sock 'em Robots.” So he was absolutely crushed, when, a few days before Christmas, his mom told him that Santa Claus had completely run out of Rock 'em Sock 'em Robots. With tears in his eyes he said, “Couldn't his elves make some more?” His mom, also in tears said, “No, Santa's all out of Rock 'em Sock 'em Robots and there's no time to make any more.” The man told me that he doesn't remember what Santa brought him that Christmas, but it wasn't Rock 'em Sock 'em Robots. “Even after all these years,” he said, “I still remember feeling deeply disappointed that Christmas.”

Lots of people get disappointed at Christmas. Like the little girl or boy who didn't get the toy they wanted. Or the mother who just wanted a happy Christmas dinner with her family, but the old tensions between her husband and son would not go away, not even on Christmas day. Or the nursing home resident who wanted to be at home with her family on Christmas day, but just didn't have the strength. Or the father who wanted to see his children for Christmas, but his ex-wife would not cooperate. A lot of people feel disappointed at Christmas.

And so did John the Baptist. John, excited about the coming of the Messiah, preached his heart out to the people of Israel saying, “Prepare the way of the Lord.” When John baptized Jesus he told the crowd, “Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” He had such high hopes for Jesus. But then, a few months later, John was—well—disappointed. You may remember the story. The authorities threw John in prison for his preaching. But even in prison, he followed the news of Jesus. And the news disappointed him. You see, John had preached that the Messiah would come with fire and judgment, that he would condemn sinners, that he would

bring the vengeance of God upon humanity, and that he would burn evildoers with unquenchable fire. But Jesus didn't match up to John's expectations. Jesus wasn't harsh and judgmental at all. He didn't scream at people. In fact, in his preaching and in his actions, Jesus was tender, gentle, and compassionate. Instead of being a Messiah of Judgment, Jesus was a Messiah of grace. So John wondered, where is the fire and the judgment? For example, John probably heard about the adulterous woman who was brought to Jesus for judgment. The Pharisees said, "Let's stone her to death." John would have agreed—judge her, make her pay for her sin. But Jesus said to the woman, "I do not condemn you." Well, this was not at all what John expected. He expected Jesus to bring hell fire, damnation and judgment—not love, grace and mercy. And when John's expectations were not met, he became disappointed—disappointed with Jesus. So he sent a message from prison to Jesus saying, "Are you the one, or should we look for another?" John felt discouraged sitting in that prison cell. For John was disappointed with Jesus.

And John is not alone. Lots of people have been—or are—disappointed with Jesus. I've met many of them. Like the husband who expected Jesus to save his marriage, but Jesus didn't, and he was disappointed. Or the woman who expected Jesus to heal her husband from cancer, but Jesus didn't, and she was disappointed. Or the man who expected Jesus to save his business, but Jesus didn't, and he was disappointed. Or the salesperson who expected Jesus to make him successful in sales, but Jesus didn't, and he was disappointed. Or the teenager who expected Jesus to make her popular, but Jesus didn't, and she was disappointed. Or the family who expected Jesus to solve their financial problems, but Jesus didn't, and they were disappointed.

Disappointment with Jesus. That was the experience of John the Baptist. He had great expectations of Jesus, but Jesus didn't deliver. And so John was disappointed with Jesus. Of course, the problem wasn't Jesus, but John's expectation of Jesus. You see, John had wrong expectations about the Messiah. Jesus never promised John that he would be the kind of Messiah that John wanted—a harsh, judgmental Messiah. And Jesus never promised to be the kind of Messiah that we want. For example, Jesus never promised us happiness or health or wealth or success or popularity or any of those things. These are not the promises of Christmas. So what *can* we expect from Jesus? What can we expect from the coming of the Messiah? What can we expect from Christmas?

The Bible's answer is simple and yet profound. Listen again to the words of Scripture: "The virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, God is with us" (Matthew 1:23). The promise of Christmas is that God is with us. In joy, God is with us. In struggle, God is with us. In our faith, God is with us. In our doubts, God is with us. In times of

prosperity, God is with us. In times of financial struggle, God is with us. When our family is caring, God is with us. When our family is fractured, God is with us. When we are healthy, God is with us. When we are sick, God is with us. In times of peace, God is with us. In times of war, God is with us. In fact, many a soldier has gone into battle quoting the words of Psalm 23, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.” The very last words of Jesus before he departed this world were, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28) The promise of Christmas is that God is with us. And because that is true, we can face whatever life brings, even death itself, for we are not alone, God is with us.

So what can we expect from Christmas? I’ll tell you what we can expect—God’s constant and eternal presence in our life. That may not be all that we wanted or expected for Christmas. But it is enough, it is *more* than enough.