

## **“Let Us Go Over to Bethlehem and Find the Promise of Christmas”**

**Date:** December 10, 2017    **Place:** Lakewood UMC    **Theme:** Joseph, Fatherhood    **Text:** Matthew 1:18-25    **Occasion:** Advent 2, series

This is the second Sunday in the season of Advent, and the second in our series entitled “Let’s Go Over to Bethlehem.” In the Gospel of Matthew, we learn something about the character of the man who served as Jesus’ earthly father. Remember this story with me.

Joseph was a carpenter from the town of Nazareth. One night he ran up against a challenging, heart-wrenching situation. He was jolted by the news that his fiancée, Mary, was expecting a child.... before they were together, that is, before he knew her as his wife.

Joseph was crushed, of course. But he loved Mary, and he didn’t want to hurt her, or embarrass her. He was agonizing over how to handle this difficult situation. As he grappled with his problem, he turned to God, wanting so much to do God’s will. And somehow, the Spirit of God exploded into his mind, and God spoke to Joseph in a dramatic way:

“Joseph, don’t be afraid. Go ahead and take Mary for your wife. Your love for each other is unique and special. The Spirit is with her, bringing new life. The child is of God. It is God’s will that she bear a son and you shall call his name *Jesus*, for He shall save his people from their sins.”

Now, when you stop to think about it, you can’t help but be inspired by the bold faith of this man named Joseph. In fact, I think far too little attention has been given to Joseph’s part in the Gospel story. His faith, his sensitivity, his kindness, his compassion, his obedience to God’s will. All of these have had a far greater impact on Christian thought than we realize.

We owe so much to the man who accepted the role of father to the Son of God. *His* spirit challenges us to become better people and better followers of Jesus. But how did Joseph do it? What gave him the poise, the resolution, the confidence, the strength, to rise to that occasion so magnificently?

Well, I think the answer is found in one word. That one word underscores the greatest promise in the Bible, the promise of Christmas. And that word is *Immanuel*, which means, “God is with us.” This is what Christmas is all about. This is what Jesus is all about. “Behold a virgin shall bear a son and his name shall be called Immanuel, which means “God is with us.”

When you believe, I mean really believe, that God is with us, that belief will change your life. When you claim that promise, “God is with us,” it is life-transforming. And that’s what happened to Joseph at the first Christmas. It changed his life when he realized God truly is with us.

And it can happen for you and me, even today. Let me show you what I mean by telling you a story, a true story. There was a family who was going through a painful, heart-breaking experience of grief. Their teenage daughter had died after a long bout with Leukemia.

Their pastor went to their home and they sat down together around the kitchen table, sipped coffee and reminisced about their daughter, Courtney. They poured their hearts out. They cried together as they remembered painful moments. They laughed when they remembered Courtney’s incredible sense of humor through it all, and some of the funny things she had done, and said, over the past few years.

They prayed when they recalled her amazing faith, her tender love and her brave spirit. Finally, when their pastor stood to leave, Courtney's Mom took his hands in hers, she looked him straight in the eye and said,

“Now pastor, don't you worry about us. We're going to be all right. This is the toughest thing we have ever been through, no question about that. But God is with us as never before, and he will hold us up, and he will see us through. God has given us strength every day throughout this ordeal, and God will give us the strength we need to go on with life, as a tribute to Courtney.”

The mother's words are powerful, are they not? *God is with us as never before.* How about you? Have you ever noticed God's presence being extra strong when you're going through a difficult time? Or maybe you've seen it in the life of someone else. Some people seem to feel the presence of God “as never before” when they go through a tough time.

I wonder why? Two thoughts come to mind. First, when we're in trouble, we're more open to God. We realize how much we need him. In my own life, when I look back, I'd have to say it was during the difficult times, the challenging times, when God seemed closest to me, and not so much during the easy times.

And second, God is very much like a parent, and parents want to be there when their kids are hurting or in trouble. Jesus changed, forever, the way that we think about God, by calling God “heavenly Father.” Jesus taught us that God is like a loving parent, not a far-off in the sky, distant or angry god in the clouds. God is more like a loving parent. Loving parents come to the aid of their children to be with them when they're hurting.

God is with us. Isn't that a great promise?! That's the promise Joseph heard and felt when God wrapped those divine arms around him when Joseph heard the news that Mary was pregnant. Joseph didn't know what to do, or which way to turn. Joseph needed comfort that day, and God gave him the strength he needed.

Joseph grabbed hold of that promise – God is with us! What power and strength there is in that knowledge – to know that God is with us, no matter what we face, no matter what we have to do, no matter how nervous or afraid we may be. We are not alone. The God who created the heavens and the earth promises to be with us. That's good news, don't you think?

But that's not the end. If God gives us the strength to get through it, God also gives us an assignment. Listen! God is not merely our personal therapist or a life coach who helps to make life easier for us. God is there for us, so that we can be there for others. We are to be God's hands and feet and voice, for those who need to know God's love.

The Lord our God says, "I will be with you, **and** I've got a job for you to do. So don't be afraid. There is something special I want you to do. Take up the torch. Take up this ministry. Do this thing for me. Don't worry; I'll be right here beside you all the way."

God came and gave Joseph a special job to do. God wanted Joseph to be the earthly father of Jesus. And listen, he must have done his job pretty well, because when Jesus grew up and began his ministry, Jesus called God "Father."

When Jesus wanted to say the best and highest thing he could about God, Jesus said, "God is like a loving parent. God is like an understanding

Father.” What a compliment to Joseph. Joseph must have been a good father, because Jesus called God *Abba*, or *Daddy*. That was a good image in his mind.

Well, the night started out to be a crisis for Joseph, when he learned that his betrothed was with child, and they had not laid together. But the night that started out as a nightmare changed Joseph’s life for the better.

He heard God tell him to be father of the Savior of the world. What an awesome responsibility. Joseph did his job well because he knew God had called him to do it. And he also knew the great promise of Christmas, the promise that you and I can claim today, God is with us!

So, whatever you’re going through, whatever God asks you to do, hold on to the promise: Immanuel. God is with us. Amen!

This sermon borrows heavily from a sermon by the same title by Dr. James W. Moore; used with permission.