

Introduction

I'd like to begin this morning by having you fill in the blank. The real meaning of Christmas is _____. I heard one man on the radio say that the real meaning of Christmas is getting gifts you don't want from people you don't like. I don't know where he's coming from, but that obviously isn't the real meaning of Christmas. So what is? Fill in the blank with a sentence or less. The real meaning of Christmas is _____. I'd fill in the blank with three words, **"God with us."** That's the real meaning of Christmas what I'm going to preach about today. Turn to the passage I read earlier, Matthew 1:18-25.

God Was "with Us"

This is a classic Christmas text. In verses 18-21, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph, explained that his fiancée Mary was pregnant by the Holy Spirit, and commanded him to marry her and name their son Jesus. According to verses 24 and 25, that's exactly what he then did.

If you listened carefully, you noticed that there are two verses that I didn't mention, verses 22 and 23, and there's a reason for that. It's because they're the ones I'm going to focus on today. They're an editorial comment by Matthew that makes a critical point. Jesus' birth fulfilled a prophecy given 700 years before in Isaiah 7:14. That prophecy, in its essence, identified who He was. He was Immanuel.

"Immanuel" is one of the buzzwords of the Christmas season. It adorns Christmas cards, emblazons banners, and is the subject of countless carols, hymns, and sermons. Yet, its impact is often lost on those who see and hear it because they don't know what it means. It's a Hebrew word that means literally "God with us." The moment Jesus came out of the birth canal and into the world, God was with us.

The "us", as a practical matter, were those who were in His physical presence. I'm talking about Mary and Joseph, his brothers and sisters,

the citizens of his hometown Nazareth, and later all the disciples who followed Him. He walked with them, talked with them, and acted in regard to them. Jesus, in other words, **was** "God with us."

God Is "with Us"

And you know what. He still **is**! We see that in the other verse I read, Matthew 28:20. This verse is part of the Great Commission and is His final charge to the disciples before He ascended into heaven. That final charge is actually a promise, perhaps the greatest He ever gave, **"and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."** Do you get the gist of that? God, in the person of Jesus, **is** still with us.

The celebrated prayer of Saint Patrick articulates that fact so well: **"Christ be with me, Christ within me – Christ behind me, Christ before me – Christ beside me, Christ to win me – Christ to comfort and restore me – Christ beneath me – Christ above me – Christ in quiet, Christ in danger – Christ in hearts of all that love me – Christ in mouth of stranger and friend."**

That's one of the most stirring prayers I've ever heard and the very heart of the gospel. God, in Jesus, is with us. His presence is embedded in all the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches of human life. He's there with us through the intimacies of births and funerals, weddings and divorces, poverty and wealth, laughter and tears, successes and failures, and so on. I told a person just before her surgery: **"The operating room to which you're going will be a holy place when you get there. That's because God will be with you in it just as surely as the surgeon and his assistants are."** What I told her wasn't just nice talk meant to encourage her. It was the truth. God is with us in and through all the activities, experiences, and events of our everyday lives.

We "with God"

But are we with Him? That's the single most defining issue of human life. Yes, God is with us. But are we with Him? If we aren't, we

can be and here's how. It's be giving Him attention.

You know what attention is. It's concentrating our mind and our body on some person or thing. We direct out thoughts and our acts with focus, with singleness of purpose, to the person or thing.

Listen carefully to what I'm going to say in that regard. Attention is the first response of love. We can in fact determine how much we love a person or thing by the attention or lack thereof that we give to it. That's a convicting and life changing truth. It has been for me at least.

My wife Jill, like many women, has a nesting instinct. It's important to her how the rooms in our house look. That's why she loves decorating them so much and she's good at it. She has a real gift for filling and coordinating rooms. But until recently, none of that ever mattered to me. I remember coming home one time, seeing a new lamp in the living room, and commenting on it to Jill. **"I was wondering when you'd notice,"** she replied, **"It's been there for six months."** That happened many times over the years and I never thought much about it.

Until I learned what I just told you. Attention is the first response of love. That convicted me. So much so that I now notice what Jill does in the rooms of our house. I make a point of looking around at the details of the rooms. Then when I notice a change, I complement her for it. She recently put up a little tabletop Christmas tree that's themed with cookie ornaments. So I commented to her how creative and cute it is and even took pictures of it to affirm that. I'm giving Jill attention by giving her acts attention.

You get the point. Attention is the first response of love - and that's what we have to do with God - give Him attention. We do that the same way we do it with people. We concentrate our mind and our body on Him. We regularly direct our thoughts and acts, with focus, to His nature, presence, acts, interests, and concerns.

Take God's nature. I've challenged all of us to build a purposeful, objective, and thorough vision of Him, to learn about the details of His qualities or traits. Once we do that, we can then reflect and meditate on

those details and praise and worship Him for them. We're giving Him attention by giving His nature attention.

Or take God's presence. I talk frequently about solitude and the fact that it's a central activity in our life with God. It is that because of what we're doing in it. You've all noticed something. A man and woman deeply in love try to be alone so they can concentrate, without distraction, on each other's presence. That's what we're doing in solitude. We're getting alone with God and concentrating, without distraction, on His presence. We're giving Him attention by giving His presence attention.

Or take God's acts like creation, redemption, sanctification, help, and so on. I have a little book at home titled *Amazing Facts for Children*. It contains remarkable facts about the human body, animals, the solar system, and other parts of God's creation. So, I learn a new fact from it every week and praise or thank Him with regard to it during that week. I'm giving Him attention by giving His acts attention.

Or take God's interests and concerns. I know from many passages in the Bible, like James 3, that my tongue is one of His deepest concerns. So, I take a few moments at the end of each day to reflect on how I've used it. And if I've used it as in instrument of death, Proverbs 18:21, I repent and ask God's forgiveness. I am giving Him attention by giving His concerns attention.

You get the idea. There are countless ways to constantly give God attention and that's what we have to do to be with Him.

Psychologists talk about ADD, Attention Deficit Disorder. They mean of course in an organic sense. But many people have ADD in a spiritual sense. They're inattentive to God. They devote little of their mental or bodily life to Him. They aren't with Him in other words.

But what about you and me? Do we have spiritual ADD? How much attention do we give God? What percentage of our thoughts and activities is directed to Him? I hope it's much because that's the only way we can be with Him.

Experiencing God

But what difference does it make that that we are?

After being tucked into bed one night, a small boy cried out, **“Mommy, I’m afraid to be alone in the dark. I want someone to stay with me.”** **“Don’t be afraid,”** she answered, **“God is with you.”** To which he quickly replied, **“But I want someone with skin on his face.”** Many people are just like that little boy. They want someone with skin on his face. But God doesn’t have skin or even a face. As John 4:24 states it, He’s spirit not matter. He’s invisible not visible. And since He is, they conclude, being with Him doesn’t mean anything as a practical matter. His presence isn’t any more helpful and real than the presence of the imaginary friends we used to have as children.

But nothing could be further from the truth. Yes, it’s true. God is spirit and invisible. But that’s exactly what makes His presence so profound. It enables Him to do something that no human being can do - penetrate and intertwine Himself within the very fibers of the human self. He can care for us in the depths of our life and be with us in finality. No human being can do that. Your spouse can’t. Your parents can’t. Your friends can’t. But God, just because He is spirit, can.

That means that if we’re with Him, we experience Him and I mean profoundly. We experience Him in three ways, two of which I’m going to share with you now.

First, we sense Him. We have a strong feeling or impression of His presence with us.

We can have this same experience with human beings. We’re in someone’s presence and don’t know it. But then he concentrates his attention on us, which in turn evokes in us an awareness of his presence. We get the distinct impression that we’re being watched or listened to and find out later that we actually were. It’s the same with God. A pastor friend of mine, for instance, just told me that he’s felt a strong sense of His presence in their worship services the last two weeks. I often feel that same thing when I wake up early in the morning and lay

there in the darkness. The Bible makes it clear. God consciously and constantly concentrates His attention on us. That in turn can and often does evoke in us an awareness of His presence with us.

But as meaningful as that is, there's a second and better way we experience God's presence. That way is an ongoing conversational relationship with Him. The Bible calls this friendship with God and it's just that, a friendship in which speaks and listens to us. Brother Lawrence explained it well over 300 year ago. He wrote that he experienced **"an ACTUAL PRESENCE of God; or to speak better, an habitual, silent, and secret conversation of the soul with God, which often causes me joys and raptures inwardly, and sometimes outwardly."** That's what friendship with God is mainly about – habitual, silent, and secret conversation of the soul with Him.

Let's go back to the life changing insight I shared earlier. That I'm to give attention to my wife Jill by giving attention to her acts. I didn't read that in a book. I also didn't think of it on my own. God spoke it to me at home one day, through the still small voice of the Holy Spirit, as I was looking at a little vignette she made. He cares about my relationship with my wife. So He speaks to me about that and everything else in my life as needed.

You can see then that it does matter, greatly, that we're with Him. It means the haunting words of an old song, **"You must go there by yourself,"** aren't true of us. On the contrary, we're never alone. God is always with us, doing what no human being can - caring for us in the depths of our life and being with us in finality.

Conclusion

I know it by experience and so do many of you. The words **"God with us"** are cataclysmic. God is with us and nothing revolutionizes our persons and lives as profoundly as being with Him in return. So do that. Be with Him. You'll then not only know the real meaning of Christmas. You'll experience it as well.