**GOD WITH US, CHRISTMAS EVE, 2023**

In the Christmas movie, *Home Alone*, a family planning a Christmas vacation gets badly distracted by an influx of festive relatives & the youngest son, ignored, acts out. Sent to a room in the attic for his misbehaviour, he wishes his family would go away so he could be alone. Be careful what you wish for. The next morning in their desperate rush to get to the airport, the family boards the plane without him, believing he is with them.

 When the little boy wakes, he discovers that no one else is home & believes his wish has come true. He’s elated. For the next few days, while his family tries frantically to return to him, he’s having a blast—eating all the junk food he wants, watches whatever movie he wants, sleeps wherever he wants & doesn’t have to answer to anyone.

 But then…burglars try to break into the house & he realizes just how vulnerable he is. But he foils the burglars with some delightfully creative kid stuff. And afterward he realizes how lonely he is. Aloneness isn’t as wonderful as he reckoned. He’s sorry for how he acted & desperately wants them back again.

 This, is like our relationship with God. While we lived in the garden with God we were contented, but then we decided we could be even happier if we didn’t have to answer to Him & could do whatever we wanted. For a while we reveled in our newfound freedom, but then we began to feel the emptiness & loneliness that comes from being isolated & at odds with God

 That brings us to *Immanuel*. Common as it is, we often overlook it or remain completely unaware of its true meaning—one of the most beautiful & enlightening names of God. And it explains one of the great reasons for Christmas in the 1st place. Sin doesn’t get much place at Christmas; that seems reserved for Easter. But we could never get to Easter without Christmas.

 Centuries before Christ was born, God promised through Isaiah, “The Lord Himself will give you a sign. The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call Him Immanuel, which means, God is with us.” Reflect on that, chew on it: God is with us!

 With all our sinfulness & rebellion, we might expect God to be finished with us, to wash His hands of us, or even destroy us completely. But no! Instead, He bound Himself to us forever by His death on the cross. And He knew this would happen before He came. He committed Himself to be near us for all eternity. More than the Christmas story, it’s the Christmas miracle.

 & God didn’t just drop in to check up on us. He physically lived among us for 33 years. & didn’t hang back. He approached lepers with a touch, healed the blind with compassion, fed the hungry with concern. *God with us*. It had always been God over us, above us, before us, God on the mountain or in the temple or in the cloud. But never before had it been *God with us.*

 Imagine our sorrowful mess if the life of Christ among us had ended with the words, “And God left His creation, which had rejected Him & put Him to death, never to come again.” A perfect life, a perfect love, abandoning those who never appreciated it, wanted it or sought it. That would be the stuff of nightmares, not Christmas.

 How blessed we are to live when we do. If we’d lived during the O.T. days we would have been clinging to the promise, strange to hear & hard to understand that somehow, sometime, in some way God would 1 day be with us—with you alone & me alone.

 The glory of Christmas is that God desired to draw near to His sinful creation & bind Himself to us irrevocably, forever. It’s not a glory we watch; it is 1 we participate in & we’re the focus.

 Well, what does it mean*? It means we are far more precious to God than we could ever imagine.*

When I look at my life I don’t find 1 shred of evidence to explain God’s attitude toward me. Yet Immanuel, God with us, challenges me with the fact that there’s something in God so merciful, so profoundly gracious & loving that He desires to be with me. You can bet that something isn’t found in me; it’s found in Him. But I’m the beneficiary. That’s why it’s called amazing grace!

 So many things devalue our existence & drown out the heavenly message. Instead of recognizing that God created us & that we’re of infinite value, we worry that we’re not rich/ famous/athletic/beautiful or, or…Yet the God who came in the form of a babe came so He could be closer to you & me. He came to remove the barriers between Him & us. He wants to be with us regardless of whatever humiliation He had to endure, whatever rejection He received, whatever pain He bore it wasn’t too much of a price for Him to pay to be with us forever.

 That God wants to be with us is undeniable. It means there’s far more to celebrate than we thought. Instead of seeking a divorce from us for our actions of trying to hurry Him out of the world, He used our ultimate rejection to cement His relationship with us forever. He didn’t just renew His vows with us; He deepened them. He committed to being nearer to us than ever before, sending His Spirit to dwell within us. That had been His eternal plan all along.

 That babe in the manger was God with us, as was that same babe, grown to manhood, hanging on the cross. They were both Immanuel, committed to us for eternity. God with us!

 What does that mean? It means we will never be alone. If the real Christmas spirit is connected to something God has done for us then we can all be a part of it—everyone of us. God with us is the God who comes looking for us. He looks everywhere—whether mud huts, tents, back alleys, apartments, suburbs, mansions & everywhere in between.

 The true celebration of Christmas is the understanding that because Jesus is Immanuel, God with us, He is the answer to our deepest loneliness. Whatever we may be feeling, the truth is that we’re never alone. The last earthly words of Immanuel were, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Merry Christmas, you who are so deeply loved!