

We do try to get that Christmassy feeling, and often, we focus on the wrong things, and we miss the mark. Like the family that I read about in Texas, who had the custom of putting large plywood letters, bordered with Christmas tree lights, on their roof each year, and the letters spelled out the word, Noel, which means “the birth.” One year, the father, who was a little behind schedule and busy, was especially late putting them up, and it was mid-December, and the family was after him to do it. Finally, one Saturday, he decided, “I’m just going to do it!” So he fought the West Texas wind, and it was late in the day, and he was muttering some very un-Christmassy words under his breath, and he struggled to wrestle the gigantic plywood letters into place on the roof in the brackets, and it was nearly dark when he finished. He clambered down the ladder triumphantly. He told the kids to plug in the lights, and they stood there, and the lights came on against the darkening sky, and it said, “Leon!” We do get things wrong, and you can’t force Christmas.

What can I say on Christmas Eve? Some of you I see only once a year, and some only this once, and that’s pressure. What of God’s word will comfort us in the strange times in which we live? More than a few of us are going through tough and trying situations, and I cannot from here in this moment make the world a safer and more peaceful place. I cannot fix the things in your life that need fixing nor can I mend your broken places or fill the emptiness of grief of the first Christmas after a loss, but what I can do is tell you the foundational truth of the Gospel. You are not alone. You are not alone! God is with you, and the God who is with you looks like Jesus. His grace and mercy are like that of Jesus. His peace and His gentleness and His love are that of Jesus.

Matthew says the babe of Bethlehem is to be called symbolically, Emmanuel, which means God with us. Matthew makes that astonishing and wonderful claim at the very beginning of the Gospel, and if you remember, at the end of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus says, “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

When we light our candles in a few moments in this place, the light is a sign and a symbol that God will stop at nothing to be with us and to save us. Our hope, no matter what, God is with us.

As John said in his Gospel, Jesus is God’s light in the darkness, and the darkness cannot put it out, though at times, I admit it does seem pretty dark. Beyond the darkness, there is God’s promise. God is with us in Jesus Christ. It was great news for all the people. There was born for us a Savior, Christ the Lord. Now, some people have trouble with Jesus being born of Mary and a child of the Holy Spirit. God made flesh, born of a virgin. Matthew is especially clear on this point of Jesus’ miraculous birth.

I like the response that Will Willimon, a former professor, and now Bishop Willimon, gave to a Duke student who asked, “Do I have to believe in the virgin birth in order to be a Christian?” Willimon said, “No, you don’t, but,” and he went on, “if we can get you to swallow that without choking, then there is no telling what we can get you to believe. You come back next week, and we’ll try to persuade you that the meek will inherit the earth, that it is better to give than to receive, that your life does not consist in the abundance of possessions, that it’s not nations or empires or even the United States, but God who rules the world.” Willimon says, “We’ll start

you out with something fairly small, like the virgin birth, and then work you up to even more outrageous assertions.”

The world is out of joint, yes. God has not given up on us, and indeed, God has come to us, and revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, the babe of Bethlehem. God has taken the initiative. That is the joy and the gift of Christmas. In most religions, the effort comes from the human side. We are sometimes confused about that, that we work and work and work to impress God, but the God who comes in Jesus is determined to be known and comes to us. God has come to us in the babe of Bethlehem not only to Jews and to Gentiles but also to all who will receive Him as a gift, not only to good people, but especially to sinners and outcasts and those who know that they've fallen short of the glory of God. He comes, as Matthew puts it, to save His people from their sins. The God who comes as Jesus takes the initiative. We seek, but eventually we realize that it is God who has come to save us, and God who will find us, as the old hymn said, “I sought the Lord and afterward I knew that He moved my soul to seek Him seeking me. It was not I who found, Oh Savior true, no I was found of thee.” The God who comes to us in Jesus is one who does take the initiative. What else? The God who comes to us in Jesus comes in complete humility. The Lutheran, Carl Branson, puts it this way, “Jesus gave us a new and paradoxical definition of God, a definition of the humility of God.” Many people were offended by this. They wanted a God of glory and power and might, not entering at the bottom, not in the despised place of Bethlehem. He, they thought, must come from the top. He must be properly introduced by the right people with the appropriate protocol, but instead we got the man born in Bethlehem and from Nazareth, and he was only prepared to give them a message of the humility of God. The identification of God with His people, and things that didn't seem to count for very much in this world. He carried His message of God to the extreme, driving the humility of God, and yet coming to us and serving us all the way to the cross. What a strange, mysterious, and wonderful God we have! The oddness of it, the mystery of it, gets even deeper. As Bill Caughman puts it, we want God to be like God, but God seems determined to be like us, to be with us, and in Jesus, born of Mary, He is. The God who comes as Jesus enters fully into the human condition, shares and understands your fears and anxieties and mine, our sadness and worry, our pain and suffering. The defining moments are placed on the hill outside Jerusalem where He was crucified, but there's a hint of it in the very beginning. As Susan Andrews puts it, the two ends of the Christian story are what set our spiritual saga apart from all other world religions, God as a tiny, helpless baby, God as a crumpled, bleeding body, God as utterly vulnerable out of love for you and me, embracing all of humanity, birth and death, and then promising resurrection in order to sanctify and redeem it for us.

Most of you are probably familiar with the story of the mother who was tucking in her little daughter one night when a storm raged outside. The thunder was loud and the lightning was intense. As the mother was leaving the room, the girl said, “Stay, I'm afraid,” and she said, “Don't worry. God is with you.” The little girl said, “Well, I want somebody with skin on!” Isn't that what we all want, and isn't that what God has done for us in the babe of Bethlehem and in Jesus' coming through His entire life. What God has done is put skin on and revealed to us the nature and the personality of whom He is. That's the meaning of Christmas, the gift of Christmas. God has come to be with us as Jesus, our Emmanuel. Amen.