

The Feast of the Nativity
December 24 & 25, 2015
Luke 2:1-20

Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace to God's people on earth. Amen

What do you want for Christmas?

What do you REALLY want?

When I was a kid one of the things

I most looked forward to in the fall
was the arrival of
the Sears Roebuck Christmas catalog.
In those days before Amazon,
before the advent of big-box stores,
catalogues were thing of wonder.

When the Sears catalog arrived,
my siblings and I would sit mesmerized,
turning the pages for hours
(and there were LOTS of pages!)

I always loved dolls,

so that was what I sought out first,

and there were all manner of dolls:
pages and pages of baby dolls,
Betsy Wetsy and Tiny Tears
and Chatty Cathy,
and all the paraphernalia that went along;
and then there were bride dolls
and ballerina dolls,
and of course, Barbies
and their wardrobe.

My brothers, typical boys,
would pour over G.I. Joe and Army sets
and tinker toys and Lincoln logs
while my older sister looked at record
players and roller skates;
we were all enthralled,
and long, hopeful letters to Santa went
into the mail as Christmas neared.

These days my grandchildren
have wish lists on Amazon.com,
their parents make most of the suggestions

at this point;
but I know it won't be too many years
before they'll be listing items themselves.

These days I expect Santa has
to employ extra elves
just to deal with Amazon wish lists.

However we make our lists, though,
most of us look forward to Christmas
as a time to have our wishes come true,
our deepest desires fulfilled.

When you're a child, it's easy for that to happen.
Santa Claus brings you the things
that you most hope for,
and Grandma slips you something extra special.
It's only as we get older that we begin to realize
that making our dreams come true
isn't always that simple.
Even when Santa brings
just the right combination of the THINGS

that our secular culture promises
will make us happy and satisfied

– the hottest Star Wars toys, the most up-to-date iPods or smart phones, awesome clothes, jewelry, whatever it is we ask for –
we can be left with a feeling of emptiness.

Truth is, our yearnings,
our hearts deepest desires,
can be nebulous,
and deep inside
we know that there are longings
that THINGS alone will not assuage.

And no matter how joyful our celebrations,
Christmas can be a source
of deep disappointment and letdown
if we succumb go to the notion
that THINGS *can* meet those yearnings.

The GOOD NEWS is that

we do receive a gift at Christmas
that can satisfy our longings,

one immeasurable gift:
the gift of God incarnate,
made flesh, human,
in Jesus.

Emmanuel

– we hear that name in the words
of the prophet Isaiah, and we hear it
in the gospel –

Emmanuel

God is with us.

God is with us in a whole new way
in the person of Jesus,
the baby we meet lying in a manger.

We make a big deal about Jesus
coming to save us from our sins,
Jesus bringing salvation,

but the truth of the matter is, I think ,
the most important thing about Jesus coming,
and coming as a human,
is that in Jesus,
God is reminding us
one more time
in the most graphic way possible
that God IS with us.
Always.

No matter what.

God is with us.

If you think about it,
most of Hebrew scripture,
most of what we call the Old Testament,
is the story of God
coming over and over again
to the people with whom
God has entered into a covenant.

You will be my people and I will be your God...
the promise has been made,

and yet God's people
have a lot of trouble holding on to it
believing it,
acting as if it is true.

Time and again God's people go astray.

They become power hungry,
or afraid,
they become angry or jealous;
they turn to false gods,
and they fail to honor the One God
who created them
in God's own image and likeness.

And yet, as scripture amply illustrates,
the Creator God comes back again and again,
sends help through
the likes of Moses and David,
calls to the people through
the words of the prophets,
rescues them,
and gives them a fresh start,

time and again,
and through it all God never
stops loving them.

Perhaps it is part of our human brokenness
that we have so much trouble
believing that God is with us,
that we find it so difficult to stick with God,
to live the way God asks us to live.

And so finally God tries one more thing: Jesus.

Jesus comes as

God incarnate

God in person

God in human form

God who feels the pain we feel

who knows hunger and thirst and desire

who experiences joy and despair,

passion and despond;

God who, as a boy, let down his parents,

who, as an adult, shocked his elders,
who knew how to party,
and who consorted with the riff-raff;
this God in human flesh comes
to remind us in a real and personal way
once and for all
that God loves us just as we are,
and is with us no matter what,
always and forever.

That is the true gift of Christmas,
the wonder of that babe in the manger
as a sign that God's love for us.
God comes to us in the most improbable way
as a baby in a small remote village,
as a man who will die an ignominious death,
hanging on a cross,
to remind us once and for all
that God's care for us
knows no bounds,

neither time nor space can interfere,
NOTHING can separate God's children
from God's love.

And when we meet that love in person,
in human form,
somehow it becomes more real for us.

What greater gift is there than that?

When all is said and done,
when the gifts are opened,
the stockings emptied,
when the Christmas rush is over,
and the newness of our "things"
has begun to wear off,
we still have the greatest gift of all.

We have the gift of Jesus,
the gift of God-with-us,

God with us through thick and thin,

and if God is with us,

 who can be against us?

If God is with us,

 what can we fail to attain?

If we hold onto God's presence,

 treasure it in our hearts,

 turn to it for strength, for renewal,

 then there is truly NOTHING

 we cannot do as God's people in the world.

And those things we long for so deeply,

 love,

 peace,

 a world in which everyone is cared for,

 everyone is treasured,

 a world where conflict is laid aside,

 and we truly love one another,

 where God's kingdom shines,

all of that becomes more real, more present.

As we celebrate this Christmas,
may all your dreams come true,
and may you receive in your hearts,
the greatest gift of all,
Jesus
Emmanuel
God is with us.

AMEN.