

“THE WONDER OF A PROMISE”

by Rom A. Pegram (12/18/16)

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"--which means, "God with us." – Matthew 1:18-23 (NIV)

So far, in this season, we've considered the wonder of a star, the wonder of a name, and the wonder of a manger. Each one of those holds deep and rich meaning for us ... yet all point us to the same thing: THE WONDER OF A PROMISE. What promise? Well, God made a promise to his people a long, long time before Jesus was ever around and God made that promise through the prophet Isaiah. It goes like this (Isaiah 7:14, NIV)...

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel (*which means 'God is with us'*).

The Old Testament shows us time and time again that God's people "believed in God." First and foremost, they believed in *God above us (as in, up there somewhere)*. When they sinned, they believed in *God against us*. And when they thought they were doing everything right, they were able to believe in *God for us*. BUT they did not believe in *God with us*—at least in the ways we need Him the most—not with us as a *mother or father* is with a child, not with us as a *person who understands what it's like to be human*—a tiny spec in a monstrously large universe, and not with us as *one who knows what it's like to give your best* and see it do no good, *to give your heart* only to be rejected, or *to cry at night* because those you love are hurting and you can't take their pain away. No, they couldn't believe that God is with us like that. So, aware of God's holiness and uncertain of the depth of God's love, the Israelites always wanted a buffer—someone to stand between them and God. For a while it was Moses, then maybe a priest or prophet or king—someone to intercede on their behalf and protect them from an angry God.

BUT ... God had another plan. God had a deep desire to be more than *God above us*, or *God among us* or even *God for us*. The desire of God's heart was to be ... GOD WITH US ... so that we would never have to be alone or feel abandoned again, on Christmas or any other day of the year, from the best day to the worst!

SO in the fullness of time, the wonder of God's promise came to be! And we heard all about it in our Christmas story for today, from the Gospel of Matthew. And in Matthew's version of the Christmas story, Jesus is referred to as ... Immanuel, which means 'God *with us*.' And now, you are not alone. Jesus knows how it feels when friends desert you, or your enemies mock you, or someone betrays you ... because he's been there. Jesus knows the pain of crying beside a loved one's grave, or the stress of temptation, or what it's like to struggle with doing the Father's will, because he's been there too. And Jesus—unlike us who are still breathing—even understands the experience of death, because he's already been there...

This, folks, is THE WONDER OF CHRISTMAS—the coming of God into our world in a way God had never come before. He came in Jesus Christ as both Lord of Creation ... and Immanuel—God with us. *Let that sink in this today!* AND God has given us a promise in the Christ of Christmas—that we'll never have to be alone again. God is with us ... in Jesus—in the Spirit of Jesus today! So, here's the big question: How in the world do we respond to such a promise? Do we just selfishly keep it to ourselves? Do we just say 'Man, that promise makes me feel good' and do nothing else with it? NO! *Like every other gift God gives us, it is to be shared!* God's promise is to be shared—proclaimed, if you will. And the way we proclaim the promise that 'God is with us' is by being *with* others—not against them, above them, or just among them, but *with* them. But how do we do that? I want to share three things with you today that should help you to be obedient to the promise of Christmas. First, we need to...

Understand the people we want to reach. The people we are meant to reach have lost something and don't know where to find it; they may have much, but something's still missing. The truth is we all need the promise of Christmas—that God is now with us and we are never, ever alone in our questions, our circumstances, our relationships and so on...

There's no one my father knew better than his own family—his own people. And my dad's Uncle Fred was one of those people my father had a heart to reach. His Uncle Fred had just about everything there was to have, materially speaking. Uncle Fred was an entrepreneur, before that was even cool! He was a businessman; he was a horse-trader; he was a professional gambler. And he'd done well for himself, to the tune of millions by the time he was middle-aged. But something was still missing from his life...

When he got word that one of his favorite nephews—barely in his 20s, was planning on becoming a preacher and was holding services in their hometown, his curiosity was peaked. And he wanted to support him, much like the other relatives who would show up. Oh, he'd been to church before—several times. But he didn't much like it; religion just hadn't taken with Uncle Fred...

When he got to Stokesdale, he saw what everyone else saw. There was a huge tent set up in the front yard of one of the relatives. And there was quite a commotion over that. Things like this just didn't happen in small towns like Stokesdale very often—especially to one of their own.

Once the services started, Uncle Fred walked under the tent and took a seat in the back. The Welborn sisters were singing for the opening night—some friends of

R.A.'s from back in Greensboro. They sang, got everyone else to singing, there were some announcements, a welcome by another relative, then his nephew—R.A. Pegram—came up to preach. And Uncle Fred listened to what he had to say—I mean, really listened. Something was different about his preaching. He was still a pretty young guy, but he seemed to know what people needed to hear—not what they wanted to hear, but what they needed to hear...

Needless to say, many of the relatives and townsfolk were shocked to see Fred Self in attendance. Yes, it was his nephew preaching, but with his lifestyle... Well, let's just say they hadn't expected his shadow to fall on the local church or this tent meeting. But a miracle happened; after the first night of services, Fred came back again ... and again ... and again. My father—along with everyone else there—just couldn't believe it! Finally, Dad got up his nerve and went and asked Uncle Fred, "Uncle Fred," he said, "Don't get me wrong. I'm happy to see you here, but I'm a little surprised too. Why have you kept coming back this week?" And Uncle Fred looked at my dad and said, "R.A., I've been to church some over the years. Most preachers simply tell me how bad I am. I already know how bad I am! But you... You keep telling me how good I can be. That's why I keep coming back!"

My father knew these people—his people. He'd come to know what their greatest needs were. No doubt you have friends, coworkers, and family members who have experienced all this world has to offer yet they still ask: "*Is this all there is?*" That was Uncle Fred. He needed to know about the promise of Christmas—that God wanted to be with him, that he didn't have to do life all by himself anymore, and with God's help he could be more than he'd ever dreamt of. We have to come to know those whose lives we want to reach. Also, we need to...

Remember our own stories. Never forget how far you've come ... with God; it's easy to forget where we came from as God continues to work in our lives, but we mustn't...

I still remember what it feels like to be disconnected from God. I know I've mentioned this before, but this is one story I can never allow myself to forget—the time when I pretty much quit the church. I was rebelling against God. I was rebelling against my pastor—my father. I was rebelling against the Church—my church in particular.

Those I was rebelling against were so patient with this 20-something, at that time. God was more than patient with me (and I know that's some of your stories too). My pastor/father was patient with me—never saying a word about my not going to church anymore, even though he'd noticed and was concerned. He just prayed. And Jane was more than patient with me too. We didn't have kids yet, at this time, but what was she going to do with this fairly new husband that quit going to church? I mean, our faith was one of the most important things we had in common and Rom was now rebelling...

Folks, how many of you have ever had experiences where you drifted away from God or just felt far away from God—at least for a time, then discovered the God who is Immanuel—the One who wants to be with you through your pain, suffering, anxiousness, confusion, and so on? One of the ways we honor God's promise of

Christmas ... is to remember our own stories, so we can truly be with others—identifying with their circumstances. And finally, we also need to remember to...

Care about others' stories. When we reach out to people, we are saying 'Trust us with your lives; trust us with your stories. We will take you to the One who loves you. Trust us; we will not disappoint you.'

While growing up, one of the greatest examples of coming alongside others—caring about their stories—that I've ever seen was my dad's friendship with one Art Nelson. We'd moved to LaFarge, Wisconsin and my dad had a two-point charge—LaFarge & Dell United Methodist Churches. Being a very small town, my dad began his ministry there by walking up and down Main Street, introducing himself to all the business owners in town. However, they all warned my dad NOT to go to Nelson's Garage. You see, Art Nelson was like the meanest person in town ... and the new preacher didn't need to deal with that kind of thing. So, what did Dad do? He went right over to Nelson's Garage to meet the infamous Art Nelson. As he walked in the garage, there was a guy up under a truck swearing a blue streak and when he saw there was someone who'd walked in (he thought it was one of his workers), he yelled at him and asked him to hand him a torque wrench or something that wasn't your standard wrench. So, Dad found it and handed it down under the truck. And he waited...

Pretty soon, Art rolled out from under that truck, looked at my father and said, "Who are you?" After introducing himself, Art looked at my dad and told him that he didn't really have anything to do with God or the church, so he's not sure why they should even meet. My dad—knowing Art's passions in life (a little bit of his story)—let Art know that he was an amateur mechanic and he just wanted to know where the best garage in town was, in case he ever needed some help... And who doesn't like to hear that they're the best garage in town? Right?

Dad cared about Art's story, to the point that they became best friends—actually informally adopted each other as brothers (since neither of them had one). They were best friends until the day Art died. And, folks, I have to tell you ... this 'meanest man in town' became one of the staunchest supporters of the Church there was. Anything the Church needed (even long after my father left there), Art took care of. And I believe it was because someone cared about *his* story—*his* life, enough to become a friend...

Folks, Christmas is not a one-time story; it's a continual story. The Wonder of Christmas is that God is with us, and we can proclaim that promise now by ... understanding those we want to reach, remembering our own stories, and caring about the stories of others. We've needed God's Christmas promise—that God is with us and will never leave us nor forsake us. And there're others who need that promise too—those who've tried to do it all themselves for too long. Let's not only be thankful for this Christmas promise, but let's share this Christmas promise too. Are you with me?