




# God with Us

DEVOTIONALS FROM DENVER SEMINARY  
FOR THE 2024 ADVENT SEASON





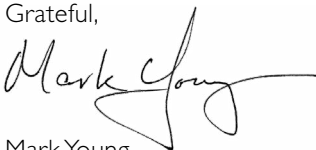
It's hard to believe it's been fifteen years since we published our first Advent Devotional in 2009, the year I became president of Denver Seminary. True confession: I "stole" this idea from another seminary where I had served before coming to Denver. And it seems like it's been a pretty good idea. Every year we receive more positive feedback on this devotional than any other publication we produce.

You likely know that on December 31, I will complete my tenure as President and transition to a part-time role as Chancellor of Denver Seminary. That looming transition has created no small measure of remembering how the Lord has been with us through the last fifteen years. And many of you have journeyed through these years with us. Through this annual devotional, Priscilla and I have invited you into our hearts and lives, sharing stories of family weddings, births of eight(!) grandchildren, life-threatening car accidents, health challenges, joys and sorrows. Thank you for the notes of encouragement we've received from so many of you *and for all of your prayers.*

Although nostalgia, the desire to return to a mythical and idealized past, is not a Christian value, remembering is. Our memories are companions. They connect us to the realities of our past. Remembering can be a deeply spiritual discipline. It allows us to see ever more clearly what we often miss in the hustle and bustle of daily life: the abiding presence of Christ in our lives no matter what circumstances we may face. As believers, we have the amazing privilege of knowing that Christ has been, is, and always will be with us. What a joy! What a Savior!

Our prayer is that this Advent Devotional will draw your heart and mind to the reality and abundance of Christ's presence in your life. May it help you rest in Him and trust Him each and every day as you celebrate His birth and anticipate His coming again!

Grateful,



Mark Young

# December 1

## Why the Night Was Silent

*While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.*

**Luke 2:6-7**

Christmas may be the noisiest time of year. Carolers caroling. Jingle bells jingling. Children squealing. Santas ho-ho-ho-ing. Christmas is a cacophony of sound. And, generally, we love it. Yet, the most popular Christmas song of all time, sacred or secular, is "Silent Night." Why?

Maybe it has to do with the fact that when we come to the opening verses of Luke 2 and the moment of Jesus' birth, there's absolute silence. Mary doesn't say a word. Joseph doesn't say a word. There's no conversation with an innkeeper or stable owner. There's not even an angelic whisper. Obviously, there had to have been some sounds. Street noise. Barnyard animals. Surely Mary and Joseph exchanged words as they readied themselves and welcomed Jesus. But Luke, under the inspiration of the Spirit, records no spoken words.

If you think I'm making too big a deal out of this, listen to the noise in chapter 1. The angel, Gabriel, speaks twice: first to Zechariah, then to Mary. Each of them, in turn, bursts into song. Then the whole town joins the ruckus, "talking about all these things" (Luke 1:65). The same thing happens in the rest of chapter 2. An angelic announcement. A heavenly choir. And a bunch of rowdy shepherds spreading the news on their way out of town.

And yet, between these two boisterous passages, we have this quiet interlude. It had to be intentional on Luke's part—this conspicuous quiet. But why?

Could it be that silence is the most fitting response to the birth of Jesus? Neuroscientists explain that when we're overwhelmed by something, our brains literally suspend activity, allowing us to process what's happening before we put words to it.

And maybe that's what was happening to Mary and Joseph that night, when months of waiting and wondering culminated in the birth of Christ and the fulfillment of God's promises. Such wonder. Such joy. Such gratitude. They were at a loss for words. All they could do was sit quietly and take it all in. And maybe that's what we need to do.

"Let all mortal flesh keep silence," an ancient carol commands, "and with fear and trembling stand." Find time this season to be quiet and simply receive Christ's presence. Open your Bible to Luke 2 and listen to the sound of silence: "for, with blessing in his hand, Christ our God to earth descendeth, our full homage to demand."

*Bryan Wilkerson, DMin  
Member, Board of Trustees*

# December 2

## Presence in the Unknown

*Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.*

**Deuteronomy 31:6**

Change is often unsettling, and especially changes in leadership. In this passage, Moses has come to the end of his leadership assignment, and disappointingly was unable to take the Israelites across the threshold of the Promised Land. However, his successor, Joshua, had been in training for years and would lead the people across the Jordan River to take possession of the land God promised them. More importantly, God would not abandon His people. He would cross over ahead of them (Deuteronomy 31:3). God with them. God with us! When we remember this, it makes all the difference in the world.

As a teenager, I came to the life-altering conclusion that God had failed me, and thus, He could not possibly be with me. In fact, when my faith faltered, I ultimately decided that God did not exist. That assumption changed the entire trajectory of my life and took decades to overcome. After returning to the Lord and fully surrendering my life to Him at the age of forty, I can look back at my life and see that God never left me. He never abandoned me. He was always there protecting and providing for me, even when I denied His existence. God was with me even when I was unaware of His presence.

The Advent season is a time of hopeful anticipation as we wait to celebrate the birth of Emmanuel—God with us. To the Israelites who were waiting for the anticipated Messiah, it was an unsettling time. Centuries of silence from the voice of God through the prophets left them wondering if God would fulfill His promise or if God was still with them.

For us, this can be an unsettling time. We are in a season of transition, new leadership, new opportunities, new family dynamics, new unknowns. In Deuteronomy, the Israelites similarly entered into a season of transition as they prepared to receive the promise God had prepared for them. It was a time of newness and uncertainty. They were excited and fearful. Nonetheless, God's promises were firm. He would never leave them nor forsake them. He was with them and He would go ahead of them. The same is true for us today: God is with us. He will never leave nor forsake us, no matter what we face.

As we commemorate the Advent of Emmanuel—the birth of Jesus—God with us, let us never forget that He loves us and is with us always. We do not face uncertainty alone. May the Lord bless you richly with His presence in this season.

*Debora Barr, MDiv  
Washington DC Site Director*

# December 3

## The Unlikely Messiah

*Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been with\* you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father?'"*

**John 14:8-9**

Once you get past wondering what this verse has to do with Advent, you will probably resonate with Philip's entreaty. Jesus was not what anyone was expecting, nor was His relationship with the Father. Had you polled the average first-century Jew, Jesus would not have even made the list of messianic possibilities. For many who considered the Messiah, the Suffering Servant Songs of Isaiah had been eclipsed by a Conquering King motif. Moreover, incarnation was not easily reconciled with monotheism. The notion of Emmanuel, God with us, had yet to be completely theologically parsed. However long anticipated, Jesus was also the unexpected Messiah.

As an Advent adventure, I invite you to join me in contemplation of how Jesus shows us the Father. Take these weeks to ponder afresh this pivotal event of human history. I still remember, some fifty years ago, the first time I read the Gospels and then the entire Bible. Coming from a biblically illiterate background, I was shocked and intrigued by Scripture's raw honesty. There was no attempt to hide rape, incest, murder, or idolatry from God's revelation. The Bible has not been sanitized. The Grand Narrative's profound improbability, by human standards, has always compelled me to believe.

What reasonable person would invent such a seemingly convoluted story? What God would choose to take on flesh as a baby, thought to be the illegitimate son of a laborer? What enfleshed God would demonstrate His divine love by submitting to crucifixion? What God would defy death in resurrection yet expect credibility?

The negative answer is no god conceived of by the human imagination. The positive answer, of course, is the only true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who is disclosed in Jesus. So let us shed our presuppositions, to the extent that we are able, and reread at least one Gospel. God was with the disciples in the person of Jesus. God is with us in the person of the Holy Spirit, but still and forever revealed in Jesus. Let us ask the Holy Spirit to guide our thoughts as we read. From His birth, which we are about to celebrate, to His death, the life of Jesus shows us who the Father is and how much He loves us. Let us simply allow His story to reorient our troubled hearts and reaffirm our commitment to follow His lead.

***Elodie Ballantine Emig, MA**  
Instructor of Greek*

\*Changed from "among" to "with" to reflect the Greek translation from the Emmanuel passage and other translations.

# December 4

## The Model of Immanuel

*Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.*

Isaiah 7:14

This Messianic Prophecy was spoken by the prophet Isaiah 700-800 years before the birth of our Lord Jesus. When we contemplate this prophecy and all that it contains, we are reminded of many of God's attributes, such as His sovereignty, omnipotence, omnipresence, and loving nature. For these alone, all Christians should shout, "HALLELUJAH!"

Still . . .

I wonder if there is more to be considered in this great prophecy than simply what God does for us. Could Immanuel being "God with us" also indicate that He wants to work through us? What impact might believers have on the world if we not only received and thanked God for the fulfillment of this great promise, but also attempted to embody the essence of it?

Inherent within the name Immanuel are at least three characteristics that, if embodied by Christians, could cause the fulfillment of the words of Christ in John 14:12, "... whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these..."

1. Humility – The Messiah humbled Himself and became obedient even to the point of death on the cross (Philippians 2:8). Jesus, the Creator, subjected Himself to His creation. Might believers do greater works within the earth if we chose to walk in the humility that Christ modeled?
2. Selflessness – Simply stated, Christ made the needs of humanity a greater priority than His own comfort and safety. He thought more of others than Himself (Philippians 2:3). Could the "greater works" of believers be fulfilled through our selflessness toward others?
3. Forgiveness – What would the world look like if humans forgave one another as Christ forgave us? Imagine a political process free of accusations, or for that matter, a Church. What might the Church look like if we truly kept no record of wrongs (1 Corinthians 13:1), readily extending the proverbial olive branch of forgiveness rather than the rod of retribution?

As we enter this Advent season, may we remember that Immanuel is more than a promise to be reflected upon; it is a model lifestyle to be embraced and imitated. It's not just Christ's gift to believers; it can and should be the believer's gift to the world.

**John Moreland, DMin**

*Director of Black Church Programs, Director of Urban Track for Lilly Pathways Grant*

# December 5

## Emmanuel and Emotional Grammar

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest. Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the one Israel praises. In you our ancestors put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them. To you they cried out and were saved; in you they trusted and were not put to shame.*

Psalm 22:1-5

I have not historically equated the idea of Jesus as Emmanuel with the idea of proper grammar. In fact, were you to ask my elementary school self, he would quickly tell you that the analysis of grammar, particularly diagramming sentences, is likely a result of the fall and has little to do with God's presence. That said, I have come to see Christ's Advent, and specifically His choice to join the human experience, as a profound display of what I have come to term *emotional grammar*.

My concept of emotional grammar developed as I observed a tendency in myself and my clients to either focus on the pain and difficulty of life, while actively minimizing hope and joy, or actively attending to what is true (or at least what we want to be true), while minimizing hurt and pain. In either case, we are prone to an emotional run-on sentence. Rather than pausing at the emotional punctuation mark (i.e., sitting and experiencing our pain or acknowledging the truth), we seek to quickly move to our default style of thinking.

"This is horrible, *but* God has a plan." Or, "I should trust God, but this is too hard." The "but" rushes us past our discomfort.

How do we place an emotional punctuation mark between our hurt and the truth? Christ's humanity, seen in His emotional and cognitive experiences recorded in Scripture, displays the power and difficulty of accepting our emotions *and* the truth. In Psalm 22, we find a prophetic glimpse into Christ's inner world, later echoed from the cross.

*"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*


*Why are you so far from saving me,*

*so far from my cries of anguish?*

*My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,*

*by night, but I find no rest."*





To pause in Christ's pain at feeling separated from His Father makes me so uncomfortable. I want to comfort Him, quickly reminding Him of the truth of His resurrection. Of course, Jesus knew this truth, yet still voiced His pain without minimizing it. His pain was visceral, and it was necessary for Him to express it.

Were Psalm 22 to end in this pain, we would be left hopeless. Yet, it goes on to show us the Messiah's next emotional sentence, a sentence grounded in the choice to believe truth alongside the valid emotional experience.

*"Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;*

*you are the one Israel praises.*

*In you our ancestors put their trust;*

*they trusted and you delivered them.*

*To you they cried out and were saved;*

*in you they trusted and were not put to shame."*

The psalmist, and Christ, actively choose to trust a Father who has been proven faithful. Keep in mind the Savior and the psalmist are still suffering as they voice their trust.

God is faithful.

I feel so alone.

Both are true, and neither should be minimized. God is with us in our pain, not in spite of it. Our pain, loss, and fear are real and valid. The truth of God's love and faithfulness is absolute. So, let us pause at the punctuation and allow our vulnerability and honesty to bring us to a reliance on our Emmanuel.

***Adam Wilson, PhD***  
*Associate Professor of Counseling,*  
*Director, School Counseling Mental Health Initiative*

# December 6

## Being and Walking with His People

*He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.*

I Thessalonians 5:10-11

The triune God's being with us was His eternal thought and desire. Before the foundation of the universe, God the Father predestined and elected us to be His children in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. After the creation of the universe, God was with and walked with Adam in the Garden of Eden. Even after the fall and rebellion, God continued to be with His people; in particular Abel, Seth, Enoch, and Noah. God was with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Elohim walked with Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and Caleb. From the Exodus on, Adonai walked with the people of Israel. The pillars of cloud and fire were symbols of God's walking with them. The Mosaic tabernacle and Solomon's temple were the symbols of God's presence with His people.

God's being and walking with His people culminated in and through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He was named "Immanuel, God with us" and tabernacled among us. His body itself became the true temple, God's dwelling and residence. When we put personal trust in the Lord Jesus, we are united with Him and become His spiritual brides. The Holy Spirit begins to indwell us and plays a role as the bond between Christ and us. Christ's being and walking with us is expanded into mutual indwelling; Christ is in us, and we are in Him. Union with Christ and communion with the triune God in and through Him is the goal of God's creation and redemption of us.

Christ's being in and with us is concretely expressed and experienced by our living together with Him. "He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him." We eat, converse, have fellowship, walk, and work with Him. We are to enjoy an intimate relationship with Him. We are called His co-workers and friends. We are invited to experience Christ, the true vine, as its branches. Christ in us is the mystery of God. "To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27).

**In-Kyung Chung, MA**  
*Director of Korean Global Campus*

**Sung Wook Chung, DPhil**  
*Professor of Christian Theology, Director of Asian Initiative*

# December 7

## The LORD is Near

*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. **The Lord is near.**\* Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*

Philippians 4:4-6

Teresa of Avila once had one of those no-good-very-bad days, which ended with her being dumped out of her carriage into the mud. As she picked herself up from the muck, she quipped, "Lord, if this is how you treat your friends, it is no wonder you have so few!" Regarding this event, J.I. Packer writes:

*One of the most attractive things about Teresa is that she could be playful like this with her God. But none knew better than she that the ups and downs of her life were divinely planned in order to mold her character, enlarge her heart, and deepen her devotion. And what was true for her is true for us all!*

According to Philippians 4:4-6, Paul understood this, too (although rather than being thrown into sludge, he was tossed into a cell). Despite his incarceration and a seemingly looming execution, he implores his friends to *rejoice in the Lord*, come what may—whether face down in life's slush or bound to its oppressive fetters. According to the apostle, the reason one can praise God when everything seems to hurt and all seems topsy-turvy is that "the Lord is near" (v. 5).

This phrase might emphasize a temporal promise or a spatial one. That is to say, God's immanence here could gesture first and foremost to Christ's expected second coming or to His Spirit's intimate presence in our lives. For Paul, no doubt, these two truths overlap as the latter serves as evidence (and "first fruits") of the former. What's more, the nearness of the Lord's presence and His coming not only give us a basis to "rejoice always" (v. 4) but also not to fret over anything—"Be *anxious for nothing*" (v. 6, NKJV). In addition to knowing that His Spirit is near and that His coming is soon, we also can be thankful in every situation because God is here listening to our prayers.

What a wonderful Advent word for us all today: our Lord is nearby. He is close in His presence, in His coming, and in our prayers. So, whether by His grace we are riding high right now or, like Teresa, wondering why we have been plopped in the mud, let us respond in thanksgiving and praise.

*Joseph R. Dodson, PhD*

*Dr. Craig L. Blomberg Endowed Chair of New Testament*

\*Emphasis author's

<sup>1</sup><https://livingbulwark.net/wp-content/bulwark/nov10p2.htm>.

# December 8

## God With Us is the God Who Remembers Us

*And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.*

John 14:16-17

*“My biggest fear is that I won’t know God as I lose my memory of everyone else; what if God is locked in my past?”* My mother bravely shared these questions with me when she received a diagnosis of cognitive impairment that is evolving toward dementia. Her faith sustains her now, but when she needs it most, she wondered, will there simply be nothing there to hold onto? Theologian John Swinton writes about memory loss and Christian faith. If our identity is held in and “by God’s memory of us”, he explains, “then we can be certain that dementia does not destroy us both now or in the future.”<sup>1</sup> What a profound declaration: God holds us in His memory.

We can meet fear head-on with hope because God’s knowing us and “dwelling with us” is not dependent on our capacity. For anyone who is looking ahead into what feels like a slowly approaching darkness, grief, anxiety, and disorientation may be present. At the same time, what is true is that there is no darkness that can hide us from God, *“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Romans 8:38-39).

The gospel story hinges on God as love extending Himself toward us with the power to reach any and all of us. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, anticipates how our human frailty will call for a knowing of God even beyond cognitive knowing. He describes how *“... the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans”* (Romans 8:28).

One great joy of the Christmas story is that God entered our world in Jesus more intimately than He had dwelled with humanity since the Garden. There He walked with them even when His children hid. Then He came to live with His people through the incarnation, and now He dwells with us intimately through the Spirit. So, we follow the lead of angels and celebrate our Emmanuel. This God-being-with-us identity is not hindered by time, or place, or a diagnosis, or even our understanding. From the act of creation to the end of time, God is ever on the move toward us, His people, in love.

**Teri Elliott-Hart, PhD**

*Assistant Professor of Training and Mentoring*

<sup>1</sup>Swinton, John. *Dementia Living in the Memories of God*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012. 221.

# December 9

## The Healing Presence of God

*And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."*

**Revelation 21:3-4**

Jesus' birth fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy of the virgin-conceived son called Immanuel, "God with us," culminating centuries of longing and anticipation by God's people. God's presence with us in Jesus became the occasion for our redemption and reflected the wholistic, personal nature of our redemption. God did not redeem us from a distance, but up close and in person. He entered our condition as God and took our guilt and alienation into Himself through His humanity. In His person and His work, Jesus redeemed us definitively and conclusively. Ironically, when we enter and receive that redemption through faith, it intensifies our awareness and longing for a full, unencumbered experience of that redemption. Advent is still a time of painful longing and eager anticipation even after and because of the incarnation.

John's vision of the New Heaven and Earth provides a peephole through which we see the fulfillment of our ongoing longing—God dwelling with us in a way that completes every one of His promises throughout history, calming all the pain of our current condition. God's presence then will be a permanently bonding presence; He will be OUR God, and we will feel it and know it in ways that sometimes elude us in this life. His presence will be a healing presence; every loss, wound, and grief resolved. When God is with us in that day, all will be made new; not patched, overshadowed, ignored or trivialized. REMADE!

Through John's vision, God almost takes the breath from our lungs by this glimpse of what will happen when He is present with us in that day and in that way. As our current experience of God's presence in Jesus comes together with our ongoing experience of brokenness in this life, this vision exercises an almost magnetic pull on our hearts.

Perhaps every time we read Matthew's declaration that in Jesus, God is with us (1:23), we should turn and cast a glance forward through John's peephole in Revelation 21 to that time when everything that bedevils us in this life will *finally . . . fully . . . actually* dissipate in His presence. That's what God's presence—God with us—does. It is meaningful to cast all our brokenness at his feet now because it will be fully healed then.

**Don Payne, PhD**

*Vice President of Academic Affairs, Academic Dean, Professor of Theology*

# December 10

## Fear Not

*So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed,  
for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you;  
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.*

Isaiah 41:10

What are you afraid of?

I confess: I'm afraid of spiders. My husband can tell the story of how he once found me atop a chair in my living room, calling for him to expose and exterminate the fuzzy thing protruding from under another nearby chair. . . only to discover that it was just a small sprig from our recently disposed of Christmas tree.

If only my fear was limited to arachnids, but I can also be afraid of many other, much deeper things. I fear letting people down. I give too much weight to other people's opinions of me. I worry about my health and about my kids. I'm afraid of failure and of loss. I can become anxious about things I can't see, can't predict, or can't control.

What are your fears?

In the book of Isaiah, the prophet recorded these words of comfort given by God to the people of Israel as He promised to send them a Savior:

*"Do not fear, for I am with you."*

Centuries later, a group of shepherds was tending to their fields, keeping watch over their flocks at night, when suddenly they were visited by an angel of the Lord who had come to share the good news that the long-promised Savior had arrived. The angel's first words to the fearful shepherds?

*"Do not be afraid!"*



Thirty years later, that very Savior walked toward where His followers were sitting—in a boat, which meant Jesus had to walk on the lake. His followers were terrified, afraid they were seeing a ghost.

Seeing their fear, He immediately called to them. *“It is I. Do not be afraid!”*

Just a few years after that, two grieving women went to the Savior’s tomb and were met by another angel of the Lord.

*“Do not be afraid,”* the women were reassured. The Savior had risen!

Throughout Scripture, the Lord’s presence tames terror and calms fear. In the same way, whatever your fears, anxieties, and worries, the reality of God with us—Emmanuel—means that we do not need to be afraid. He is perfect love. And perfect love drives out fear (1 John 4:18).

Do not be afraid, for He is with you.

***Angie Ward, PhD***  
*Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program,*  
*Associate Professor of Leadership and Ministry*

# December 11

## Who Are the “Two or Three”?

*For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.*

**Matthew 18:20**

One-question pop quiz: What's the context for this famous saying of Jesus about Him being wherever two or three gather in His name? We even gave you a hint—it's in Matthew 18! Did you know or did you have to look?

Go to any of the numerous websites that itemize the most misused Bible verses and Matthew 18:20 is probably there. We almost universally cite this passage to reassure a small group of Christians who had hoped for a larger turnout that God is still with them! Well, of course He is. God is omnipresent; that means He's everywhere, all the time. God is present when only one Christian is around. Or none. Or no people at all. But no first-century Jewish audience needed to hear Jesus say that. They had been taught that from infancy.

The context of Matthew 18:20 is Jesus' famous teaching on church discipline (v. 15-19). If we try to make things right with someone and fail, we are to take one or two people with us to try again. One plus one or two others makes two or three! Two or three people may be more persuasive than just one. There are other steps to take if that step fails. But verses 18-19 stress that heaven is in accord with the Church when it follows the process Jesus outlines here. So, when Jesus refers to two or three who gather in his name in verse 20, He still has in mind the two or three who are trying to help an offending person turn back to God and be reconciled to those they have offended.

What does this have to do with the theme of “God with us”? There are three key statements in Matthew's Gospel on the topic—the prediction of the baby who will be Immanuel (Matthew 1:23), Jesus' promise to remain (as God) with us forever (28:20), and this verse in 18:20. God is powerfully with us when we are following His instructions to try to be reconciled with others. That is the Christmas message as well. Is there someone you need to initiate reconciliation with, as far as it depends on you, this Christmas season? If so, now is the time to start the process.

***Craig Blomberg, PhD***  
*Professor Emeritus of New Testament*



# December 12

## The Great Exchange

*We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true by being in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.*

I John 5:20

Was Jesus born into our world solely to die for our sin? Could there be more to the incarnation of the Father's Son than commonly thought?

Karl Barth was known to say, "I know no God, but the man Christ Jesus." Only in Christ can we fully encounter God and come to know Him (see Matthew 11:27, John 14:6, and Acts 4:12). In the incarnation, the Son entered into our weak, fallen, sinful humanity. He penetrated into the darkness of our hearts and into our alienation and rebellion against God.

In the vicarious humanity of Christ, Jesus saw through Adam's eyes how we see the Father, He experienced with Adam's mind the lies we believe about God, and with Adam's heart He experienced Adam's god, the god of the fallen mind who subtly keeps the messages of I am not lovable, good enough, or acceptable enough, alive in our hearts.

Taking on Adamic humanity, the Son of God assumed the totality of our human experience. From the cradle to the grave, He pressed more deeply into the experience of our fallenness. He was one of us—seeing what we see, feeling what we feel, and knowing what we know. He felt our shame, our darkest fears of being dissolved into nothingness and unimportance. Jesus did not come to change God's mind about us. He entered human existence to identify with us, stand in the mess with us—to see the distortedness we see.

As humanity disfigured the face of the Father by interpreting God through its own pain, shame, and rejection, Jesus saw, felt, and experienced the fallout of living under this burden.

**But He refused to believe this rendering of the Father.**

Thus, in His profound vicarious identification with us in our fallenness, He did not fall. He pushed through our darkness and experienced the Father's embrace. Jesus, the Savior of the world, triumphantly wrought out atonement and reconciliation in our humanity and in His person.<sup>1</sup> This is the great exchange: He became like us so that we can be like Him (2 Corinthians 5:21). T. F. Torrance writes, "the prime purpose of the incarnation, in the love of God, is to lift us up into a life of communion, of participation in the very triune life of God."

*Paula Tipton, PhD*

*Associate Professor of Counseling, Counseling Division Chair*

<sup>1</sup>These reflections are heavily drawn from the works of C. Baxter Kruger such as *Jesus and the Undoing of Adam*, and "The Hermeneutical Nightmare" in *An Introduction to Torrance Theology: Discovering the Incarnate Savior*, edited by Gerrit Scott Dawson.

# December 13

## Into the Neighborhood

*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us...*

John 1:14

The neighborhood—urban or suburban—is a complicated place. There are exponential relational and social dynamics. There are varied expectations of what it is to be a neighbor. A place seemingly built for knowing and being known can quickly turn isolating.

Eugene Peterson rendered John 1:14 as, "*The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.*" Whenever I read that, I find there is something grounding to it. Christ moving into the neighborhood doesn't make His incarnation any less complicated, though there is something of a rootedness I notice when I pause with those words. There is witness being reported. Perhaps you want to pause with them now. What do you notice?

Of course, it is Advent. This is the season when we remember the longings of the people of God as they waited for the arrival of a long-promised neighbor. The Word has yet to move into the neighborhood completely, yet we believe the Word has already come. Advent is not a suspension of that faith, but a time to practice the language of longing that is so beautifully core to it. It is when we remember those longings are not only our own, but that they also belong to the entirety of the children of God.

In 1 Kings 8:27, Solomon asked, "*But will God really dwell on earth?*" Or, as rendered by Peterson, "*Can it be that God will actually move into our neighborhood?*" These are questions marked with a longing the people of God would hold for another thousand years. Longing we hold today. The question is followed with expectant prayers and an honest, yearning refrain: *Listen!*

Listen! To the oppressed.  
Listen! To the hungry.  
Listen! To the immigrant.

Listen! From your dwelling in heaven.  
Listen! Forgive us!

This Advent, may we plead for the longings of God's children. May we desire for a weary world to rejoice. May we be expectant that Christ will arrive and has already. May we pray *Listen!* as we are open to unexpected arrivals. May we wait for the God who is with us, who makes a complicated neighborhood a complicated place of hope.

During Advent, write prayers of longing and witness. Where do you long to see God move into the neighborhood? Where have you witnessed God's presence? Try this format:

*But will God really dwell on earth? Listen!*

*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. Listen!*

**Chris Hess**

*Director of the Soul Care Initiative*

# December 14

## Faithful through the Ages

*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

**Isaiah 9:6**

As we journey through Advent, we reflect on the enduring truth of “God with us.” This statement not only encapsulates the heart of the Christmas story but resonates through the ages, as exemplified in the seventy-five-year history of Denver Seminary.

Isaiah’s prophecy, spoken centuries before Christ’s birth, reveals the nature of the promised child who would embody God’s presence among us. This child—Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace—demonstrates how God is with us in every facet of life.

Just as God was with His people in ancient times, He has been present in the life and mission of Denver Seminary since its founding.

As Wonderful Counselor, God provided wisdom to leaders as they navigated cultural shifts and educational challenges, while remaining true to the institution’s biblical foundations.

God has been evident in the Seminary’s growth and impact. From its humble beginnings to becoming an institution with a global reach, Denver Seminary has experienced God’s strength in overcoming obstacles and expanding influence.

The Everlasting Father’s unchanging love have been a constant through economic ups and downs, societal changes, and generational shifts. God’s faithful presence has sustained the institution’s mission to cultivate leaders for Christ’s church.

As the Prince of Peace, God has been present in the Seminary’s commitment to fostering unity in diversity. Denver Seminary strives to be a place where different perspectives can engage in dialogue, reflecting the peace that Christ brings.

As we prepare our hearts this season, let us marvel at how God has been with us through the ages. May history inspire us to trust in God’s continued presence as we face the future. May we, like those who have gone before us, be bearers of God’s presence. In our words and actions, may we reflect the love, wisdom, strength, and peace of the Child born in Bethlehem. This Advent, as we celebrate God’s faithfulness, let us open our hearts anew to the wonder of “God with us” and allow that reality to fill us with hope, joy, and purpose for the years to come.

***Krystal Clemons, PhD***  
*Assistant Professor of Counseling*

# December 15

## The God Who Roughs It

*I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling.*

2 Samuel 7:6

We're all friends here, right? Then let me start with perhaps my most scandalous opinion as a native Coloradan: I don't like camping. I just don't understand the appeal. After all, humans are the most vulnerable of all mammals. We're not designed for life in the wild, where it's unpredictable, severe, and dangerous. I, for one, start to panic at the thought of finding myself in parts so remote that no one can hear me cry for help. We're at the top of the food chain solely because of that three-pound lump of grey matter in our skulls. Our soft bodies—fangless, venomless, defenseless—are better suited for buildings. For the life of me, I can't understand why anyone would choose a tent when we have houses.

Only one problem with my theory: when the God of Israel was given the choice between a house and a tent, he chose to sleep on the hard ground with nothing but canvas overhead. When David, fresh off building himself a fancy new palace, asks God whether He would like one, too, God is indignant at the very question: "*Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling.*" Evidently, this strange God isn't one for insulation and running water and electric appliances. He wants to be wherever His people are, even if that means roughing it.

And it will. You and I, we've wandered far off course. We've ended up in parts so remote that no one can hear us cry for help—well, almost no one. The gospel is the story of the eternal Son choosing to leave His heavenly temple and make His way "into a far country," as the theologian Karl Barth put it. Like a wilderness rescue ranger, He's willing to traverse any terrain to seek and to save the lost, no matter how dangerous: the wastelands of our sin, the crags of our despair, the swamps of our shame. When the Word became flesh, He "pitched his tent" (John 1:14) where His people are, without a permanent place to rest His head. No matter. He always liked tents better, anyway.

***Ryan Tafilowski, PhD***

*Chair of the Theology Department, Assistant Professor of Theology*

# December 16

## God in a Rotten World

*The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means “God with us”).*

**Matthew 1:23**

The first Christmas, God sent His Son into the rotten of the world. After Joseph learned that his wife-to-be was pregnant—knowing he wasn't the father—he must have slipped into his own stinky spot. In first-century Jewish culture, marriages were often arranged by families at birth or in childhood. Young girls became “betrothed” early in puberty, sometimes as young as twelve years old. Betrothal held the significance of our modern-day marriage and was only dissolvable by legal divorce. While the betrothal period lasted a year and consummation was deferred until after the wedding, the couple was considered “husband and wife” from the moment of betrothal. Any violation of the betrothal vows held the same as violation of the actual wedding vows, holding serious consequences.

What would Joseph do? Matthew tells us that *“Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly,”* (Matthew 1:19). Win/sorta-win, right? Except that Joseph would still be in a stinky spot of rotten, wondering about Mary, struggling with apparent betrayal and loss.

Then an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and explained the whole situation. Mary was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. She would have a son. Joseph was to name him “Jesus,” which means “the Lord saves.” The dream ended with a phrase that sprayed hope into Joseph's heart—and into the moldiest holes in our lives today. *“...and they will call him Immanuel (which means ‘God with us’)”* (Matthew 1:23).

God with us. Right there in the middle of our stinky rotten. So we never have to be alone in it again. So we can come to understand that there is nothing we need to hide. There is nowhere we need to run. Immanuel. God came to be with us in our rotten—not to leave us there—but to provide a way out.

Into our rottenness, into our cavernous need for the very Source from which we began, God arrives with Himself in the form of Father who created and caused us, of Son who saved us from ourselves, and of Spirit who remains with us, present in all we do and reminding us of what we already have in our God.

Thank you, Immanuel, God with us, Christ with us. Thank you for being in our rotten, lifting us to new life each and every day.

*Elisa Morgan, MDiv  
Alumna, Chair of the Board of Trustees*

# December 17

## Friendship with God

*I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.*

John 15:15

In this passage, the apostle John says that God pursues us, anoints us to bear fruit, challenges us to ask for things in the Father's name, and ultimately commands us to love one another.

I once asked a dear friend—an alumna of Denver Seminary whose kids are older than mine—for one piece of essential parenting advice for my family in our current season. His advice was simply to “Win the hearts of your children.” My friend didn't expound upon this instruction. Instead, he only added that we can't lose this aim amid all we do with and for our children—we must continually commit ourselves to winning their hearts. As I've considered his advice, it occurred to me that God continually pursues our hearts. In doing so, He softens our hearts toward Him and toward loving one another.

Having this relational perspective is hard for me at times. I find it easier to know and understand God as Creator and King, or even to accept that He sacrificed His Son, Jesus, on the cross for us. But believing that He desires my friendship and experiencing Him as Immanuel, “God with us,” requires another level of relational depth with the Father, Son, and Spirit. Sanctification through friendship with God is a journey I am continually pursuing, and I find I have to slow down to enter into this process. It is easy to pray, to ask God for wisdom and guidance, and then move; it is harder to slow down, participate, and commune with God.

Friendship with God transforms us and can enable us to live the abundant life we are promised in the Scriptures. Just as Jesus beckoned His disciples to pursue friendship with Him in the first century, He beckons you and me to pursue friendship with Him today.

**Chris Johnson, MBA**  
*Vice President of Advancement*

# December 18

## Immanuel Means “God with Us”

*Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”*

**Matthew 28:18-20**

This Advent season, think about how the word “Immanuel” describes Jesus as Lord and Savior when He was announced in Matthew 1:23. There we learn that Immanuel means “God with Us.” What is the presence of God, and how important is it?

God commissioned Joshua as leader of Israel in Joshua 1:5-9. There, God gives to Joshua His vision for fulfilling His promise of the land, *“I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.”* It is this promise of God’s presence that forms the key to the Israelites’ success in taking the land that God had given them.

The great missions of God are all set in the promise of God’s presence. When God is present with His people, they succeed and cannot fail; when He is not present, they fail and cannot succeed. We see this in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20. Jesus commands His followers to go and make disciples of all nations. The Commission ends with *“I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”*

This is why, when the word Immanuel appears in Isaiah 7:14 and 8:8-10, it is within the context of a war that threatens the line of David as well as God’s promise to bring about the Messiah and salvation through that lineage. The king would not trust God enough to ask for a sign, and so the sign he was given was that a child would be born who will be called “God with Us.” The Assyrian army, the most powerful army of the age, would come and bring death and destruction to the people. However, in Isaiah 8:8 and 10, the people of Israel are promised that God is indeed with them.

As God delivered the Israelites in that day, He will fulfill His promises today. We may feel threatened by the circumstances of this world. However, we know that the promise is secure. God is with us. This began to become real for us when Jesus was born into this world. As Christians we go into this season carrying the hope of the world, the Savior who came to redeem humanity.

***Richard S. Hess, PhD***

*Distinguished Professor of Old Testament and Semitic Languages*

# December 19

## The Role of a Lifetime

*Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.*

Philippians 2:6-7

The history of Hollywood is rife with accounts of notable actors who turned down roles in movies that eventually became blockbuster hits:

- Burt Lancaster turned down the lead in **Ben-Hur** in 1959. The role of Judah Ben-Hur went to Charlton Heston, who won the Academy Award for Best Actor.
- Bette Davis turned down the role of Scarlett O'Hara in the 1939 classic, **Gone with the Wind**. Instead, the role went to Vivien Leigh, who won an Oscar. Davis thought that her co-star was going to be Errol Flynn, with whom she refused to work. But it wasn't Flynn, but Clark Gable who co-starred with Leigh in what became a legendary Hollywood film.
- Sean Connery was approached to play Gandalf, the wizard from J.R.R. Tolkien's **The Lord of the Rings**. However, Connery passed on the part in Peter Jackson's adaptation, in part because he did not want to spend eighteen months filming in New Zealand, and in part because he didn't really "get it." Instead, Ian McKellen took up Gandalf's staff to wide acclaim.
- But Connery had earlier benefited enormously from another actor's decision. Albert Broccoli and Harry Saltzman had purchased the film rights to Ian Fleming's **James Bond** novels, and originally approached Cary Grant about playing the part of 007. Grant declined because he did not want to commit to a film series. Instead, Sean Connery was cast as Bond, starting with **Dr. No** in 1962.
- The script for **Elf** was first written in 1993, with Jim Carrey attached to star. However, the movie's production was delayed. By the time it got cranking in 2003, Carrey was no longer interested, having recently starred in **How the Grinch Stole Christmas** (2000), and Will Ferrell became Buddy the Elf.

Many people have been eager to play God, but only one God was eager to play a person.

Thanks be to God that Jesus was willing to play the role He stepped into at Advent! The eternal Son did not think of His status as God as something for His own privilege and comfort. Instead, His very status as God meant He had nothing to prove, nothing to achieve. And precisely because He is one with such a gracious, giving Father, He "made himself nothing," and became a baby, a servant, a sacrifice. Jesus gave and gave and gave, taking the role of a lifetime (and of an eternity) for us.

Merry Christmas!

*David Ward, MDiv  
Director of the Compelling Preaching Initiative*



# December 20

## Light in the Darkness

*When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."*

**John 8:12**

During graduate school, my daily commute consisted of a two-hour trip crossing through two mountain passes. Many semesters, I either had an early morning class or a late evening class, both of which required me to traverse the mountains in darkness, and often in snow. However, I dreaded the evening drive most, because I knew that the darkness which enveloped me would last for my entire commute. There was no hope of brightening skies or emerging rays of light. The darkness always weighed on me, bringing with it sadness, fatigue, and gloom. In contrast, when I headed down the mountain for morning class, I knew that the skies would start to turn pink, the mountain tops would begin to glow with the first rays of the sunshine, and soon it would be fully day.

The emotional impacts of light and darkness are surprisingly powerful. The darkness hides, covers up, and drags us down into the depths. It isolates and diminishes. The Psalms and the prophets use the language of darkness to describe the emotional burden, the despair, and the sin of life. When we are in the darkness, we look to the skies for the first indications of the morning because when we long for the light. When we are surrounded by light, our spirits rise with tentative hope.

It is no wonder that light is such an important descriptor in Scripture. It is also no wonder that the presence of Emmanuel, *God with us*, is tied closely to the presence of light. In Isaiah 9:2, the prophet proclaims the significance of the coming Messiah by saying that *"the people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned."*

Centuries later, Jesus declares in John 8:12 that He *"is the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."* What a rich and momentous declaration! In Jesus we never walk in darkness. We are not alone, hidden, or isolated. The light that brings hope, redemption, comfort, and peace is always present with us. Because God is with us, there will always be the emerging rays of light even in a darkened sky. There will always be the hope of the morning, the light of life.

***Patty Pell, PhD***

*Assistant Professor of Theology, Justice, and Advocacy,  
Executive Director of The Gospel Initiative*

# December 21

## Beyond Christmas

*Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.*

**Joshua 1:9**

During the Advent season, many Christians sharpen their focus on the expectation of the coming of Jesus, Immanuel. This is the high sign reminding us that God is with us. We may associate Jesus' coming with perfectly decorated homes, department stores, and even our places of worship. Some of us are extra cheerful, demonstrate kindness, and are more generous than usual. We may hold on to those thoughts of Christ being with us—in our midst—during the Christmas season and into the early days of the New Year.

But once there are no tangible or visible signs that point to the arrival of the Anointed One, the question becomes, "How do we remind ourselves of His omnipresence, especially during our most challenging seasons?"

The story of Joshua, an unexpected Old Testament witness, is a perfect example of how to keep our focus heavenward beyond Christmas and every day of the year. Just like all of us at one time or another, Joshua was forced to face a difficult task in front of him. Joshua knew it would take more than his military experience, skill, and training to meet the goal of entering the Promised Land. Moses, his mentor, was dead. God had appointed him as the leader of the nation of Israel. It was going to take strength and courage to face this daunting task.

Without any visible signs to remind him of God's presence, Joshua depended on the voice of God, who spoke directly to him about the task ahead. God did not suggest, nor did He ask; rather He commanded Joshua to be strong, courageous, fearless, and encouraged whether in the valley or on the mountain. He was to live out this command no matter what he faced or when he faced it.

We would do well to do the same. The message of "God with us" is not limited to a season. Know that He is with us before, during, and after we have celebrated Jesus' coming because His presence and His command extend well beyond Christmas. As He was with Moses and Joshua, He has been, He is, and He will be with us wherever we may go. Have a Merry Christmas!

***Iantha Brown, MDiv***

***Black Church Programs Community Liaison***

# December 22

## Advent Hope in My Car's Front Window

*Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.*

**Deuteronomy 31:6**

I heard that the absolutes in life are death and taxes. Perhaps there is another—a guarantee of change. Change is something most of us resist and fear. We become anxious during change because we are reminded that we are not in control. At least, that is my reaction when change is on the horizon. Does this resonate with you? Let me confess my resistance and fear throughout some major life milestones.

I was a college “hippie flower child” of the ‘60s and ‘70s. I protested everything to get out of classes. One protest that was a soul issue for me was the Vietnam War. I didn’t protest the troops, but what I saw as unjust was when college men were draft exempt and poorer men were drafted. My fiancé lost his college exemption and had a “three” draft number. I panicked. Following him in the military was not my idea for a future as a psychiatric social worker. Yet in following my first husband, God called me to military chaplaincy. I retired from this first ministry over twenty years later.

I took a Denver Seminary course and enrolled in the DMin program. I was asked to create a chaplaincy program and become a part-time Training and Mentoring director. I planned to create the program and then work with the military. My health worsened and I retired early. Providentially, I was offered a full-time position at the Seminary the very day my military retirement was effective! I have a DMin, not a PhD, so how could I compare to such brilliant scholars around me at the Seminary? I am only a practitioner. I found myself asking, “God, what are you doing?” Again, over twenty years later, I am now retiring from my second ministry vocation.

I don’t know what is next. Will there be a place for me to serve God? Will my old brain and body be up to it? Anxiety and fear of the unknown rise again. I know it’s likely a shorter ministry at my age. Yet Elisa Morgan, chair of our Board of Trustees, encouraged me: “You aren’t dead yet!”

The God who brought me through Advent times in my past will be faithful to bring me through this Advent as well. I couldn’t see what He had for me in my car’s front window, but it was plain in my rearview mirror. The good news is that God has a plan for our lives that includes hope and purpose through our faithfulness. We only need to trust God and embrace the future He has planned for us.

***Jan McCormack, DMin***

*Associate Professor of Chaplaincy and Pastoral Counseling*

# December 23

## God with Us through His People

*In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*

**Ephesians 2:21-22**

Advent is a season of longing, waiting, and anticipation. It is a season that draws us to embrace a liminal space that we typically aim to avoid. It beckons us into the discomfort of unanswered questions, unfiltered longing, and a deep, aching awareness that this is not the way things are supposed to be. Even as we anticipate the celebration of Christ's first coming, we ache for his second coming when He will make all things right. In this in-between, we believe that God is present with us, even as we long for the unveiled fullness of His presence.

The presence of God is a major theme throughout all of Scripture. Though this is commonly recognized, it's also the case that those of us in a modern, Western context default to an individualistic perspective of God's presence: God is with me. But this isn't the complete picture. God dwells in each believer; but His presence is manifest in a unique way among His gathered people.

This is the perspective of Ephesians 2:21-22 and other biblical passages that use the metaphor of a temple for God's people. Earlier in this passage, Paul emphasizes that the work accomplished by Christ on the cross included not only the reconciliation of humanity to God, but also extended to reconciliation between Jews and gentiles: He "destroyed the dividing wall of hostility" and "made the two groups into one new humanity."

The passage describes two mutually exclusive building projects: a dividing wall and a living temple. Christ has demolished the former to build the latter. This means that in this liminal space between Christ's first and second comings, we can live in the presence of God-with-us through the presence of God's people. On our own, our sight will inevitably be overwhelmed with darkness and the voice of God will seem muffled at best. This is why God has called us to be the corporate temple in which He dwells, leaning on one another in the darkness until the light dawns once more. Only together can we have the strength to proclaim that our God is a God-with-us, even as we long for His return.

***Darlene M. Seal, PhD***  
*Assistant Professor of New Testament*

# December 24

## God with the Shepherds?

*But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."*

**Luke 2:10-11**

One quiet night near Bethlehem, shepherds were keeping watch over their flocks. The fields, likely filled with the sounds of animals and the cool night breeze, were suddenly pierced by the brilliance of an angel of the Lord appearing before them. Terrified, the shepherds were told, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11).

But why the shepherds? In the time of Jesus' birth, shepherds were among the lowest in society. Their humble occupation and status often led to discrimination. Yet, when God chose to make the most significant announcement in history—the birth of Christ—He did not send His angels to the palaces or the homes of the powerful. Instead, He chose to reveal this news to the shepherds in the fields.

This decision is no coincidence. It speaks volumes about the heart of God and how He is truly "God with us." He is with the poor, the marginalized, and those whom society often overlooks. The shepherds, in their simplicity, became the first to hear and witness the arrival of the Savior. Their story reminds us that God's presence is not reserved for the elite or privileged. He is present with those in need, those who are broken, and those who may feel insignificant.

As we reflect on the theme "God with us" this Advent season, we are invited to follow God's example. Just as He was with the shepherds, we are called to be present with the poor and vulnerable in our communities. Here in our own city of Denver, we can fulfill this call to action by building community with the many Latin American immigrants in our neighborhoods. They come seeking safety, opportunity, and a new beginning, often facing challenges of poverty, isolation, and discrimination. We can embody God's presence by extending compassion, offering practical help, and standing alongside them as they navigate the difficulties of a new life in a foreign land.

Perhaps it's as simple as inviting a family into our homes for a meal, helping them learn English, or providing support through local outreach programs. When we show up in these ways, we reflect the heart of God, who chose to make His dwelling not in places of power but among the humble and the outcast.

***Wilmer Ramirez, PhD***

*Associate Dean, Diversity and Programming with Ethnic Communities,*

*Director of Hispanic Programs*

# December 25

## Better than a Plan

*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. 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."*

Matthew 1:20-21

What do we need when our circumstances seem so confounding and overwhelming that we can't begin to imagine what we need? I don't know about you, but my first response is typically, "We need a plan." Now, there's nothing wrong with having a plan. But I'm sure that having a plan is not what we most need when we don't even know what we need.

When Joseph learned the unthinkable—that his betrothed, Mary, was expecting a baby, even though they had remained pure before their wedding—he made a plan. In order to shield Mary from public disgrace, Joseph would annul their betrothal quietly. But in that moment, Joseph didn't need a plan; he needed to hear from God. And in His mercy, the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, assuring him that the baby in Mary's womb was the One who would bring salvation to His people (Matthew 1:18-21).

When the world seems to be out of control and the future seems uncertain, what we need most is the assurance the Lord is with us no matter what. And that assurance is exactly what the Lord gave Mary and Joseph when their plans for the future were unraveling.

In Matthew 1:22-23, the Gospel writer reminds us of this truth, "*All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' (which means 'God with us').*" This promise came to the prophet Isaiah when the very existence of the nation of Israel was being threatened by enemies far more powerful than they were (Isaiah 7:14). What did Israel need most when their future was uncertain? They needed to know that the Lord was with them. And so do we.

We cannot control the future no matter how thorough we make our plans. Although it's good to plan, and making plans gives us a measure of comfort, our plans are as stable as a house of cards. We need more than plans to face an uncertain future; we need the assurance that Jesus, Immanuel, walks beside us into that future.

On this Christmas morning, Priscilla and I are one week away from retiring from full-time vocational ministry. It's a big step for us, and it creates feelings of uncertainty. So, on this Christmas morning, we're going to say aloud to one another, "Immanuel, God with us," and rejoice in the knowledge that, as we step into an uncertain future, Immanuel walks with us.

He walks with you, too!

*Mark Young, PhD  
President of Denver Seminary*

We pray that knowing God is with us  
fills your hearts and minds  
with His comfort, joy, and peace  
this Christmas season.

*May God bless your  
Christmas and New Year.*

*Mark + Priscilla Jorg*  
And the entire  
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