

“God. With. Us—Hope of the World.”

During the depression jobs were scarce and people were hungry. It was a dark time in the lives of many people. One desperate young man saw an ad in the newspaper for a company looking for a telegraph operator. He literally ran as fast as he could to the address of the building and went to the office where the interviews for the job were going to be held. When he got there, the room was jammed with other people wanting the same job. The young man's heart just sank. As he stood there wondering what to do, wondering if it was worth his time to stay, he heard a steady flow of dots and dashes—the sound of Morris Code—over the sounds of that busy office.

Suddenly, the young man's eyes lit up. He walked over to a door marked "Private," turned the doorknob, and went inside. A few minutes later he came out smiling. He had the job! The employer told the rest of the applicants that they could leave. Well, the other applicants immediately started complaining. "We want an explanation! We deserve an explanation! This guy comes in late, cuts in line, and you hire him?!" The employer paused a moment, and then said: "You'll get your explanation. All you have to do is listen to the dots and dashes."

Everybody stopped and listened. They couldn't believe what they heard. Over and over the dots and dashes repeated the same message in Morris Code they had been repeating for an hour: "If you hear this, come in. The job is yours. If you hear this, come in. The job is yours."

Over all the commotion and distractions around Christmas, and with all we've been through these last two weeks with ice and snow, there is a very important message to hear. Maybe you've already heard it this year, but maybe you've been so busy, so distracted, so consumed with other things that you haven't heard the real message. God is with us. God is with us. God is with us!

Today we're wrapping up this series of messages called "God. With. Us." That's the translation of one of the names of Jesus, Emmanuel. God with us. The goal of this series has to be to learn and apply the events of Christmas so that it's more than just a time of indulgence. Instead we see its significance and apply that to our lives and share it with others. We started this series with the reminder that it's not the job of government, or schools, or retailers to convey the events of Christmas. It's not their job! It's our job as Christ-followers; it's our job as the Church, so we're taking it back. We've talked about why God broke into history when he did, why it was at just the right time in human history for many reasons. Last week we talked about recognizing divine interruptions in our own lives; how Jesus was an interruption then and still is now. Today I want to talk about how God with us, puts us in a place of becoming hope for the world. So take out your messages notes and study guides...

God with us, equipping us to be the hope of the world. You see, hope is one of the foundational principles of the Christian faith. It's one of the great gifts of Christmas that God wanted to communicate to the world. When Jesus started his public ministry at age 30, he brought healing and restoration to many people. Especially people who appeared hopeless. Many people saw him as the fulfillment of prophecy. Matthew wrote this after Jesus performed some miracles. **“This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: ‘Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope.’” (Matthew 12:17-21, NIV).**

Because God is with us, we have been given the responsibility of conveying hope especially to those who feel like they have none. This foundational principle of hope means that we convey to the world that what you see is not all there is. Especially if what you see is empty, lonely, difficult, painful. That because God is interacting with humanity, because God is not hiding waiting to be found, because God is present in the present, we have a source of strength, a source of direction, **the** source of forgiveness, that allows us to know that in him there are no hopeless situations, and there are no hopeless people.

Why is this so important? Because God knows that when people lose hope, they die. In his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl tells about the years he was trapped in the horrors of Nazi concentration camps. He was captured and transported like a wild animal. He was given two minutes to strip or be whipped. His clothes were taken, his hair was shaved off, his identity removed—he was condemned to a living death.

His father, mother, brother and wife died in the camps or were sent to the gas chambers. His existence was full of cold, fear, starvation, pain, lice, vermin, dehumanization, and terror.

Frankl wrote that he was able to survive because he never lost the quality of hope. But the prisoners who lost hope in the future were doomed. When prisoners lost hope, Frank said, they would quickly experience mental and physical decline. Prisoners without hope would die from the inside out.

Frankl said it would usually happen all the sudden. One morning a prisoner would just refuse to get up. He wouldn't get dressed, or wash, or go outside. No matter how much the other prisoners would plead and beg, no matter how much the guards threatened, it had no effect. Losing all hope, he had simply given up and would lay there in his own excrement until he died.

When a prisoner lost hope, said Frankl, "he lost his spiritual hold."

God with us. The "us" part of that means we have been given the role of distributing hope to the world, so that people have something pulling them into the future. So that they know that what they see at the moment isn't all there is.

After the ice storm, when we were at capacity in the shelter here, I talked to quite a few people and heard their stories. I went up to one man and asked him how he was doing. And he told me his story. He said, "I'm actually homeless right now. And I'm so glad you're open as a shelter because this kind of weather is deadly for those of us that have nowhere to go." He was very thankful that we had opened our doors. I asked him what he would do after the storm had cleared. He said, "I'm looking for a job, and hopefully, things will work out so that I can get a new start in life. I'm ready." He kept thanking me for what we were doing, and I could see a sense of hope in his eyes. I saw it in the eyes of many people because they had a place to go.

One of our foundational beliefs as a congregation is that the local church is the hope of the world. We print this on our vision, and talk about it as people get ready to join the church. **We believe that only one power exists on this planet that can truly transform the human heart and ultimately change the world. "It's the power of the love of Jesus Christ, the love that conquers sin and wipes out shame and heals wounds and reconciles enemies and patches broken dreams and ultimately changes the world one life at a time." This radical message of transforming love has been given to the Church! (Bill Hybels, *Courageous Leadership*).**

Bill Hybels puts it this way, "There is nothing like the local church when it's working right. Its beauty is indescribable. Its power is breathtaking. Its potential is unlimited. Whatever the capacity for human suffering, the church has a greater capacity for healing and wholeness. The potential of the local church is almost more than I can grasp! No other organization on earth is like the church. Nothing even comes close."

We believe that the local church is the hope of the world. If the world is to have a future, we must be about the business of pointing out what that future can be like.

God said these words to the prophet Jeremiah, **"I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11, NIV).** That's God's message to us and that's our message to the world.

That's why I often say that we are not playing church. We are not just filling time. This isn't a show. We are on a mission; and that mission, ultimately, is to change the world, one life at a time in unison with other churches of all traditions who are seeking to do the same thing. We are conveyers of hope, and future.

William Booth founded of the Salvation Army in the 1870's. Booth had it on his heart to reflect the love of Jesus to the poor. He spent most of his years reaching out to the poor, the needy, the sinners in London.

Every Christmas there was a tradition in London that the churches would send representatives out into the streets to invite the poor to Christmas celebrations that each church would host. Huge crowds would

gather waiting for an invitation. The Anglican representative would start by standing on a box and announcing, "All of you who are Anglicans, come with us." Then it was the Roman Catholics: "All who are Catholic, come with us." Then the Methodists, the Lutherans, and all the other denominations announced, "Whoever belongs to us, come with us." But after all of the church representatives had made their invitations, there were always a lot of people still waiting around. At that point, William Booth would stand up on his box and shout, "All of you who belong to no one, come with me."

The real reason why God came to us is for us to hear the same words. God said to us through the birth of Jesus, "All of you who once belonged to no one, can now belong to me. Come with me. All of you waiting around in the darkness of fear and hopelessness and sin and hatred and unforgiveness. All of you, come with me!"

And if you choose to follow, and I hope that you do, he gives you the same responsibility. **You** are to go out into the darkness with the same intent, with the same invitation: "All of you who belong to no one, come with me! Come with me."

"All who have not heard the gospel or have rejected it at some point in their lives, come with us. All who are weary and heavy laden, come with us, and God will give you rest. All who are in any kind of need, who are without hope, come with us. All who wish to be a part of a community where Christ is Lord and everybody is somebody, come with us."

I want to end with a song from Point of Grace. It's simply called "Emmanuel God With Us."...

Tomorrow is going to be a great day! Christmas Eve. We are going to have some awesome times of worship. Do what you can to extend an invitation to some people who might be seeking some answers. In doing so you might just change a life. In extending that invitation, you might just bring light and hope in ways you could never imagine.

Show your hope to the world through us. Be God in us. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.