

“Good News; Bad News; Good News”

Jesus had a lot of nick names. The Gospel writer John was the one who called him “the Word.” That means that Jesus was the very essence of God, the mind of God, the will of God. Jesus’ Hebrew name is Joshua. Jesus and Joshua both mean, “God saves.” When the ancients talked about the coming Messiah they talked about Emmanuel. “God with us.”

God with us. Emmanuel. When we come together to worship we don’t have to say, “Oh God, please be here with us as we gather...” His name is, “God with us”, he’s already here. When we pray we don’t need say, “God, please hear my prayer...” His name is “God with us.” He right there listening already. There’s that part of the Christmas song, “Away in a Manger” where it says, “Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay, close by me, forever and love me, I pray.” I love the song, but we don’t really need to pray that. His name is Emmanuel, God with us, he’s near you already.

Here are my thoughts about this tonight: When God is near you that’s good news. And honestly it’s bad news. But then it’s good news again. Good news, bad news, good news.

Let’s start with the good news about God being with us. One of the biggest metaphors for Christmas is the entrance of light into the darkness. As a kid I was always scared of the dark. I it was that fear of what could be hiding in that darkness. I always needed a night light of some sort. Honestly, I still do. I’m still kind of scared of the dark, not because of what could be hiding, but because of what is hiding. Little-bitty toys that puncture your feet, hairballs from the cat that go squish in the night.

Light is good news. That’s why the ancients picked this time of year to celebrate the birth of Jesus. We don’t really know when he was born, the Bible doesn’t tell us, but those early Christians picked this time because of its symbolism. You know what happens from June to December the days get shorter and shorter and shorter. The darkness begins to overcome the light. But on about December 21, what happens? The days start to get longer. Light starts to win. That’s why they picked this time of year to focus on Jesus birth. The light is back! The light is pushing back the darkness!

Sometimes our lives see pretty dark. Pretty bleak. This week I spoke to two different people who had recently spent time in jail. That’s darkness. I got an email this week from a member of the church who’s father had a major health crisis. I went by to see him and he had died just before I arrived. I talked to so many couples recently that are struggling to keep their marriages together. It can seem so dark. The good news is that it’s into that darkness that the light has arrived.

You know, the first Christmas was not calm and bright. This was a real birth, in unsanitary conditions, after a 90 mile, 4 day, walk. Mary is away from home and family. This is not how she pictured the birth of her first born. Her mother is not there with her. No family around. It’s her first baby and she’s got to be scared.

That’s real life. And in the midst of the pain, God was at work. In the midst of the pain, and the blood, and the sweat, and the tears, and the mess, God was working. And that’s where God works in our lives. Good news, God is with us in the middle of the mess. Jesus was after all the Mess-iah.

We think in our own lives the month of December should be off limits to painful things happening. And when life happens in a way that doesn’t line up with our dreams, we get deeply disappointed with God with life. We have in our minds the perfect Christmas: The meal is perfect. The turkey’s not underdone or overdone, and nothing’s going to be burned.

Your family is all going to be there and they’re all going to like each other and enjoy being with each other. Every single gift you give, nobody will ask for the gift receipt because you nailed it with the perfect gift. Right!

In my experience it seems like the whole month of December, all hell seems to break loose. Somehow in the month of December, more people get laid off. In December, lots of people decide their marriage isn’t going to work anymore. Inevitably there are a lot of people who get bad medical reports in December. There are always deaths in December, sometimes tragic deaths. That’s reality.

So we look at this and think, “This doesn’t fit with my dream of Christmas.” Surely God could give us one month where everything would be OK and we’d experience the peace, and the goodwill of all people, but because we don’t experience it. The contrast between our dream and reality makes it all seem even worse.

But listen, Christmas wasn’t God’s promise that for one month everything would be OK. It wasn’t God’s promise that he was going to fix everything. Christmas was God’s response to the pain we find ourselves in.

Christmas was God's answer, God's antidote to the fact that we're going to find ourselves in situations like Mary. Situations so dark and so frightening that we're not going to know how to make it through. And in the midst of that, God was giving us a message, the God of the universe that we can't see with our own eyes said, "I will show you who I am, and I'm going to walk with you in the midst of the messiness of your life. I want to make it clear." And that's the message of Christmas. Emmanuel. God with us. God with us. That's what God was up to at Christmas. It's his way of saying I'm with you no matter what. I'm with you in the midst of the pain. No matter how hard your life may be. I'm with you even in the darkest places.

Jeremy Whatley's a young man who is going through some very, very hard stuff right now. They're trying to figure out why he's losing strength in his legs and hands. They think it's MS, but they're not sure. He hurts all over and can't do simple things like pick up a pen. But in the midst of all this, he told me he's connecting deeper and deeper to God. That into his darkness, there is light, there's hope, there's healing.

The good news of Christmas, that God is with us means he'll carry you and see you through. I don't know how or in what way, but that's what Christmas promises. He is with you. That's good news.

But Christmas is also bad news. If we really embrace what God had in mind at Christmas it can seem like bad news, because it can seem like a big interruption of our plans and if you're like me, interruptions are bad news. I don't like my schedule to be interrupted, my plans, my prayer time, my "me" time. I especially don't like it if God is interrupting me in the middle of my selfishness. Or my materialism. Or what if God is interrupting my sin?! God being with us can really seem like bad news.

In fact, I had a realization sometime this year that there are times in my life and yours that we don't want God with us. Almost every Sunday I walk out of here saying, "As you go out into this week, know that you don't go alone. God said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.' God is going ahead of you to lead the way, he's going behind you to encourage you, he's walking beside you to be your friend, he's above you to watch over you and he's within you to give you his joy."

I say that every week but I've realized that sometimes we say, "God, I've got some stuff going on this week, some plans, and you don't really need to tag along. I'm going to be hitting some porn sites. I'm going to fritter some money away at the casino. I've got to pad my expenses at year end here. I've got that illicit affair to attend to."

God being with us, sometimes it's not good news. Sometimes it's bad news to us. It's like the burglar who broke into a house one night. He had a flashlight and was shining it around looking for valuables. He found an mp3 player put that into his sack and as he did, a strange, disembodied voice echoed from the dark saying, "Jesus is watching you." He nearly jumped out of his skin, turned off his flashlight and froze. He didn't hear anything for while waiting there in the silence so after a few minutes, he shook his head, promised himself a long vacation after his next big score, then clicked the flashlight back on and started looking for more valuables. Just as he pulled the stereo out so that he could disconnect the wires, clear as a bell he heard, "Jesus is watching you."

Totally rattled, he shined his flashlight around frantically, looking for the source of the voice. Finally, in the corner of the room, his flashlight beam came to rest on a parrot in a cage. The burglar said, "Did you say that?" The parrot said, "Yeah, I'm just trying to warn you." The burglar said, "Warn me, huh? Who do you think you are anyway?" The parrot said, "I'm Moses." "You're Moses! What kind of people would name a parrot 'Moses'?" And the parrot answered: "The same kind of people that would name a Rottweiler Jesus." Sure enough sitting there right under the cage was the biggest dog he'd ever seen. The parrot said, "Sic 'em, Jesus."

It can sound like bad news that God is with us when we're doing something we know we shouldn't, or not doing something we should. It can sound like bad news when we realize that this Baby Jesus, if we choose to follow him, he's going to turn into a man who will call us to a pretty high standard of how we live. He challenged people all the time. He pushed people to go to the next level. He said that it wasn't enough to just think good thoughts and say kind words. He sent people out to feed the hungry, and clothe those without enough to keep warm. He said, "When somebody hurts you or offends you, don't just forgive them 7 times, but 70 times 7 times." He said, "Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you."

That's hard work and it can sound like bad news when we're like, "God, why? Don't you know what they did, how they hurt me? And you want me to offer forgiveness?" "God, can't you just leave me alone? Can't you just let me irresponsible and self indulgent and uncaring toward the needy? Can't you just leave me

along and let me be unforgiving toward the people who hurt me? Really its OK. You don't need to be with me all the time!"

Too bad; so sad. Emmanuel, God is with us. Like it or not and he's got high expectations. And as long as you're still breathing, there are things he's calling you to do. He's not going to force you to live out this high calling, but he's also not going to leave you alone. You can run, but you can't hide. God's like, "I'm Emmanuel and I'm going to keep calling, inviting, beckoning, begging even, until you accept my invitation. It can sound like bad news. High expectations can sound like that sometimes. He says, "Don't live your life on the world's terms. Live them on my terms and you'll know what real life really is."

One of the ministries we are just now starting to support right here in Joplin is called Life House. Its mission is to reach out in one of the poorest neighborhoods and offer afterschool programs for kids, mentoring, a healthy meal, tutoring with homework, a place to connect to God. They're offering recovery groups for adults, and parenting classes. Life House is there to offer hope. These are kids right here in Joplin, just a few minutes away from here who don't have coats, and go to bed hungry every night. And if you're a follower of this King, part of what you say is, "I think he wants me to do something about this. If I see somebody in need, I'm supposed to do something."

Scripture says, "**Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for the orphans and widows in their distress**" (James 1:27)

Jesus demands action, that we carry his light into the world. He has some very high expectations, he wants to interrupt our lives and that can sound like bad news. Especially if we're sinning and we know it; especially if we're avoiding what he's calling us to do and we know it; especially if we're so wrapped up in ourselves that we don't really give a rip about anybody else. It's bad news.

So Christmas is good news, and bad news, and then more good news. Let's get back to the good news. The good news is that even if we fail at living out those high expectations, God still loves us. God's ready to help, to forgive, to offer a fresh start.

John put it this way, "**For God so loved the world that he gave his only son.**" (John 3:16). God gave. Why? Why do you give gifts? Why do I give gifts? The last couple of years we've really cut back on our gift-giving, but in the past I would spend hours looking for the perfect gifts for my family. And I'm not the kind of person who makes a list and then asks the people on my list what they want and goes out and buys it. What's the fun in that?! In fact, if somebody tells me what they want, that's pretty much a sure thing they're not going to get it. So I would wander around the mall and various stores and salespeople would wander up and ask, "What are you looking for?" "Well, I'm looking for the perfect gift that will tell somebody that I love them and I'm thinking about them, and carry them in my heart. Show me that." I think we all want to give gifts, that when the person we've given to looks at or uses, they'll say, "Man, my dad really loves me. My husband really loves me. My kids really love me."

So John says, "God so loved the world that he gave his only son." God loved the world, so he gave his son. That's Christmas. God giving his son to us because he loves us. His love gets lived out in his forgiveness, his mercy, his grace.

So that no matter how much we've blown it, how bad we've run away, how ugly we've been to people around us and to God himself. His grace, his grace is deep enough, and wide enough. It's actually pretty amazing.

Christmas is a good news, bad news, good news day. God is with us, he's got some very high expectations, but he never abandons us when we fail, when we fall. Maybe this Christmas it's time to really embrace it all. To trust him in the dark times, to strive to follow him as your king, your Lord, and to let him help you up when you fall. Christmas is real. And for tonight that is the Good News...and the bad news...and the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the holy Spirit. Amen.