

Forth Sun – Advent A - 2016

A few years ago, I was watching a Channel 13 news report about a young woman who had just awakened after being in a coma for 2 years. As the young woman's family was wheeling her out of the hospital, a TV reporter asked the woman's mother, "How were you able to go so long without giving up & pulling the plug?" ...Without any hesitation, the mother graciously answered his insensitive question, "...We just kept hopin' on the Lord,... we just kept hopin' on the Lord." ...Hoping on the Lord.

Our readings today present us with what I believe is the greatest message of HOPE in all of Scripture. ...We heard it in our 1st reading from the prophet Isaiah,....& then echoed in Matt's account of the birth of Jesus,....And the msg is this: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a Son, and they shall call Him *Immanuel*." This message of HOPE is contained in the Hebrew word *Immanuel* which means "God with us." ...three little words – **God with us**...Let's take a look at these three words – one at a time - and see how they hold within them life-changing HOPE not only for Christians, but for the whole world...I'll start with the word "with."

The word "with" usually means close to... *Immanuel* – God with us – means God is close to us...Now, just what does this mean? ...Well, here's a question for all you wives out there:...When your husband is with you, is he always really with you?...I mean are there times when he's in the same house, in the same room, on the same couch, ...physically close to you,...but mentally and emotionally, he's in another ZIP code?...And even when you tell him how you feel about something, he's not really with you...Like : "Honey, I'm really worried about our son. I think we should have a talk with him," ...and he responds: "Uh, yeah,sure ...Have you seen the remote anywhere?"...Fortunately, Jesus isn't like most husbands...The Bible shows us over and over how Jesus – *Immanuel* - is truly WITH us...Just as He said He would be in the last scene of Matthew's Gospel, when He promised, "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

In Letter to Hebrews, the author tells us that Jesus is able to empathize with our human frailties because He lived our life...He experienced more than His share of human troubles and sorrows. He spent 40 days and nights hungry and thirsty in the desert fighting Satan's temptations. ...He was hated and persecuted for preaching the truth... He felt the pain of losing someone close as He wept at the death of His friend Lazarus...He was betrayed by a close friend...He was abandoned by His disciples ...He had periods of doubt and fear...Remember how in the Garden at Gethsamene., He asked His Father to spare Him from the terrible suffering He knew was coming?... Because of all that Jesus faced in His life, we know that He understands what we face every day...There's nothing we go through that He hasn't gone through...In Jesus, we don't have a remote, distant, somewhere up-in-the-sky God who can't relate to His people;...we have a God who is truly WITH us! ...and, that - for us- should be a HUGE source of HOPE...AMEN!!! ...Are you WITH me so far?

Good. Now let's look at the word "God"...It's good to have someone who is really WITH us, ...who understands what we're dealing with and can empathize with us,... but there are times when we need more than that,...when we're dealing with something really tough: like losing a loved one,...losing a job...a bad doctor's report,...a troubled child,...a broken family... When we're dealing with stuff like that,...we need more than a well-meaning friend saying, "I can feel your pain."...We need someone who not only feels our pain,.. but can help us handle the pain, ...and maybe even relieve the pain...And we have that someone,...we have Immanuel. We have Jesus...God with us...We have God Himself, ...the all-powerful ruler of heaven and earth...for whom nothing is impossible. ...And that – for us – is an even HUGHER source of HOPE!

Ok, so, in Jesus - Immanuel - we have a God who is not only truly WITH us,... we have a God who can help us....US...and that brings us to the word US.

There is a long passage in Hebrews 11 that tells about 18 of the Bible greats like Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Noah, and Joshua and David,...about how God was with them in their time of trouble and how God used His awesome power in their behalf...As I read this passage, I thought, "Wow! This should give me hope when I'm having troubles."...But then the thought came to me ..."Wait a minute, those were biblical super-stars...spiritual GIANTS...Of course, God would help Abraham, Sarah and Moses...Sure God would help Noah, Joshua and David. They had faith that didn't waver even when things looked hopeless...They had faith that God would see them through.

But I'm not sure I always do...Put me in hard to handle situations and I might fold like a Christmas card,...crumbling under my doubts and fears...I can understand why God was with those Bible heroes, and did powerful things for them ...But I'm NOT LIKE THEM! ...On a scale of 1 to 10, my faith can range from 8 or 9 when things are going good, to 1 or 2 when things are going bad.... I suspect that more than a few of you can probably say the same thing.

But, Immanuel is God with **US**,... not God with just **some** of us,...not God with just **the more faithful** of us,... **but God with every one of us**,.... and that includes all of us who struggle to follow Jesus,...all of us who sometimes fall on our faces...That's the hope and promise of Immanuel,...that the God who parted the Red Sea to help the Israelites escape,... The God who shut the mouths of the hungry lions to save Daniel from sure death,...the God who rolled the stone away and walked out of the tomb,... is the God – in Jesus Christ - who is with US, and who understands and identifies with US ...He knows our every need and every heartache, ...every weakness and every fear. ...And He can ease our heartaches, ...strengthen our weaknesses...calm our fears...help US through anything.

There was a Christian conference at which a well-known black preacher was delivering a fiery sermon to an audience of mostly white ministers...It seems his audience didn't respond with the same spirited "AMENS!" he was used to getting in his church, so He looked out at them and said, "If this message doesn't light your fire, then your wood must be wet!" ...My friends, if we hear this message today that Jesus – Immanuel - sees, knows, and identifies with our lives, ...and He is always here ready to help us, ...even if we are not super Christians ...If we hear this and it doesn't LIGHT OUR FIRE, THEN OUR WOOD IS WET.

Legendary country singer Merle Haggard, who overcame a shameful history of crime and prison, said it like this in a song: "My reason to hope never dies no matter how low I sink."...His reason to hope was Jesus Christ...Our reason to hope will never die no matter how bad things get...because our reason to hope – for ourselves, for those we love, for the world - is Jesus Christ – Immanuel!

During this Advent season the Church calls us to prepare for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ...Yet, even as we make ourselves ready for His glorious return,...we find hope and comfort in knowing that He is already **HERE**...Immanuel – God with us...as He is in this Eucharistic celebration.

So, if there is anyone here today whose wood is wet,...who is spiritually numb,...who is beaten down by trouble, pain or sorrow,...you need to believe...you need to know ...that in a few minutes as you come forward for Holy Communion, ...you will have an intimate encounter with the One who knows your pain...who knows your trouble...who knows your sorrow....the One who can do something about it. ...The One who promises to be there with you through it all.

As you come to the Lord's table to receive the Living Jesus....silently whisper to Him, "O come, O come Immanuel."... Invite Him into your heart...into your trouble....into your pain...into your joy...into your life.....For in truth,...He has been there all along. AMEN!