

4th Sun – Advent A

Well, it's almost Christmas,...and I have a message of HOPE...It comes from the greatest source of HOPE - the Bible,...And I believe it's the greatest message of HOPE in all of Scripture,...first stated in the Old Testament by the prophet Isaiah,...and echoed in Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus that we just heard,...and it's this: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call Him *Immanuel*..."...This message of HOPE for the whole world is contained in the Hebrew word *Immanuel* which means "God with us."...Three little words – God with us - hold within them some big promises for us,...so I want to take these words - one at a time – and dig down and grasp the rich source of HOPE each one can be for us...I'm going to start with the word "with."

1st, let's look at its definition...Webster's dictionary says the word "with" has to do with being near to, close to, connected... When we use "with", it usually means close to... *Immanuel* – God with us – means God is close to us...Now, that's very nice, but is that something to get excited about?...Just what does that mean?...Well, let me ask this question of all you wives out there:...When your husband is with you, is he always really WITH you?...Are there times when he's with you physically,...in the same room,...on the same couch,...in the same car, ...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..."Honey, I'm worried about our son. I think we should have a talk with him."..."Uh, ok..Have you seen the remote?" ... Right about now my wife is shaking her head, yep, because I've mastered the art of being close to her but not WITH her...and I'll bet there's a lot of you guys who've done the same...Right?

Try to imagine that you have Jesus near you,..right there next to you,...and you pour out your heart to Him,...telling Him about some big trouble in your life. And after you've bared your soul to Him,...He responds, "Aw, do you have any ice cream?"...I'm not being irreverent...I'm just making the point that someone can be close to you but not necessarily WITH you...Thankfully, that's not Jesus....The Bible shows us over and over that Jesus – *Immanuel* - is truly WITH us, ...and yes, that is something to get excited about...It is for me...For example,...

In Hebrews 4, it tells me that Jesus is able to understand my weaknesses, because He was tempted in every way just as I am...From reading John's account of how Jesus cried at the death of Lazarus,...I know He can sympathize with my broken heart when I lose a loved one. ...In Mat 8 where Jesus healed a leper, it says "He took on Himself our infirmities and bore our diseases."...Why? So he could identify with what I'm going through when I'm sick... And bec He prayed to His Father in the Garden at Gethsemane, asking to be spared from the suffering that lie ahead,...I know He'll understand when I'm afraid of what's coming.

Here's the thing...The hope, the joy, the comfort that comes from Immanuel is not just that God came to earth and dwelt in a human body and was close to us for 33 yrs...It's that Jesus chose to shed His divinity and become one of us in every way except sin...Now, this may sound strange,...but I'm glad Jesus was betrayed by a close friend...I'm glad he was abandoned by His friends...I'm glad Jesus was hated for doing the right thing...I'm glad He was afraid of the cross ...I'm glad Jesus knew what it was like to have too much work to do and too little time to do it...Why am I glad?...Because everything Jesus had to face lets me know that He understands what we face every day... He can sympathize with our hurts, ...our weaknesses,...our sorrows...our fears...There is nothing we will go through that He hasn't gone through....I'm glad that God is really WITH me! Aren't you?...AMEN!!!...Are you WITH me so far?

Good, now let's look at the word "God"...It's good when we have someone who is really WITH us...who identifies with us,...sympathizes with us,...but there are times when someone putting their arm around us and comforting us isn't enough. ...Sometimes we need more...If my son is

in an accident and is in serious condition,...I don't want the doctor to come out and tell me, "I understand what you're going through Mr. Tocci....My son had a similar accident."...I want a doctor WHO CAN DO SOMETHING for my son!...Sometimes we need someone who's not only WITH us, but can do something to help...And when we speak of Immanuel,...that someone is Jesus - almighty God Himself! ...We don't just have *someone* with us...we have Jesus ...we have God, the all-powerful creator of heaven and earth...for whom nothing is impossible.

We have a God who is WITH us and UNDERSTANDS us,...but more than that,...we have a God who can help us....us...and that brings us to the third 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 strength when I'm having trouble."...But then the thought came to me that,..."Wait a minute, those were biblical super-stars...spiritual GIANTS...Of course, God would help Moses and Noah and David...Sure God would help Peter and John and Paul...Of course, God would help them...They had faith that didn't waver even when things looked hopeless,...They had faith that didn't falter.

BUT I DON'T!...Put me in those same situations and I'll fold like a Christmas card...When things get tough, I have some real doubts and fears...My faith isn't that firm and unshakeable...I can understand why God was with those Bible greats and did powerful things for them and through them...But I'm NOT one OF THEM!...If there was a roll call of the weakest,...the not so spiritual, ...not so saintly. ...I'd be right up there in the front of the line...and I suspect some of you would be there with me.

So, ok, we can understand why God was with those giants of the faith,...but **WE NEED to KNOW THAT GOD WILL BE WITH US!**... And that is the hope and promise of Immanuel- God with **US**. ...That word US includes you and me...and all the little people,...all of us who struggle as Christians,...all of us who sometimes fall on our faces... I don't know about you, but that sure is exciting to me... that God...the one who parted the Red Sea for the people of Israel...the one who shut the mouths of the hungry lions to save Daniel...the one who rolled the stone away and walked out of the tomb...is with ME...understands and identifies with me ...knows my every need and every heartache, every weakness and every fear...and is a God who can soothe my heartaches,...strengthen my weaknesses...calm my fears...help me get through anything.

I just read about a Christian conference where a black preacher was preaching a fiery sermon to an audience of white preachers,...It seems his audience didn't respond as vocally as he was accustomed to in his church, so He looked out at them and said, "If that doesn't light your fire, then your wood is wet!" ...My friends, if we hear this message today that Jesus - Immanuel - sees, knows, and identifies with our lives,...and He stoops down to wrap His strong arms around us,...even though we are not super-Christians, ...if we hear this and it doesn't LIGHT OUR fire, then OUR wood is wet.

During this season of Advent we have been reminded to be prepared for the coming of our lord Jesus Christ ...Yet, even as we wait in joyful hope for His glorious return,...we find hope and comfort in knowing that He is **HERE**...Immanuel - God with us...in this Eucharistic celebration....As Pope Francis writes in his 1st encyclical - "Christ is truly present in the supreme act of His love,..the life-giving gift of Himself."

So, if there is someone here today whose wood is wet,...if you R spiritually broken,...beaten down by pain and trouble,...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 someone

who knows your pain...someone who can do something about your pain...someone who is willing to be with you through it all, ...even if you don't think you deserve it...None of us do.

That some-1 is....IMMANUEL!!!

As you come to the Lord's table and hold out your hands to receive Jesus,...silently whisper to Him, "O come, O come Immanuel." Invite Him into your life,...into your heart...into your trouble...into your pain.....For in truth...He is already there. AMEN!