

Matthew 1:18-25
December 18, 2016

Today is one final “blue day” in this season of Advent. Blue is not only a colour for sorrow for sin and repentance, it is also the colour for royalty in honour of the coming King. We have all four candles lit today because the light is closer now and things are looking brighter

In Jeremiah 29:11, God had this word for His people in the midst of a dark time in their history, *“For I know the plans I have for you ... plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.”* God’s people were in captivity in Babylon. Jerusalem had been destroyed. The temple area looked like ground zero. There was nothing left but a heap of rubble. There was no king on the throne. There were no sacrifices in the temple. There was no temple. All seemed lost. Many of the people wondered what happened to God’s plan. The long awaited and long promised Saviour and King seemed more remote by the day.

The promise goes all the way back to Eden. God had a wonderful plan for a perfect world and a wonderful fellowship between God and humankind but the devil had other plans. He set man and God at odds through sin. His desire was to separate God and man forever and when Adam and Eve sinned, it looked as if his plan had succeeded. You can almost hear his scowl, “I love it when a plan comes together.” But God wasn’t ready to give up on the people He loved. A love so deep it was willing to sacrifice self for the sake of others. It’s hard to fathom that kind of love, although sometimes you can get a glimmer of it. It looks like the hurt you feel when you wish you could take the place of someone who is in a life of hopelessness. They are sick or suffering or in trouble. They are just so messed up by life that you wish and pray that it could be you instead or that you could somehow just make it magically better.

That’s what God’s love is like. Satan had a plan but God had other plans. The Old Testament and Gospel for today bring us wonderful words about a wonderful plan and a wonderful name for a Saviour. He will be called Emmanuel, God with us, God for us, God in our place. Our God of grace was not about to leave us all to the devil’s plan so He promised a wonderful deliverance and a powerful deliverer. He would come himself. He comes in human form, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. He comes carrying a cross and bearing all the sins of the world. He comes to be in every way tempted as we are. He knows our needs, and our hurts, and our sadness. He knows the burden of sin and how it breaks us away from God, condemns us, and steals our hope.

Ask 100 people what is the true meaning of Christmas and you will hear answers like family and peace on earth. Others find the meaning of the holiday season at the mall at the midnight madness sale. Most of us have high expectations for this time of year and yet it becomes one of the worst times of the year for depression and sadness. Why? Because our expectations never get met. And they don’t get met because we have bought into the wrong expectations, and we miss the true meaning. The heart of Christmas is Jesus, the one whom the Father sent to rescue us from our sin and brokenness. Here in the manger is the focal point of all of history. The hymn tells us, “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight.”

Many people approach Christmas with the idea that if it is to be a blessed time, they have to make it happen. That’s a recipe for disaster. God’s plan is the opposite. He wants us to simply receive the great gift He has for us. Jesus is God’s plan to bring us back into a relationship with Him. Jesus is God’s way to restore hope. Jesus is God’s way of being with us. He is Emmanuel, God with us, God in our place. Don’t you love it when a plan comes together?

The Old Testament prophets brought a promise. That promise is fulfilled in the God-man, crucified and risen again. It is this Gospel that is proclaimed and received by grace as you and I are called to faith and called to belong to Christ Jesus. You see, God's plan is still coming together, as you too are among those who can say, "God is with us." His word reaches out and touches your heart and ends the separation that Satan started. God is with us. If I were to ask you to describe the message of Christmas in just one word, what word would you choose? You probably could find no better word than Immanuel. Immanuel is the name God ascribed through the prophet Isaiah to the infant who would be born of the virgin. It means "God is with us."

Isn't this the message of Christmas: that in Christ, God is with us? Isn't this the miracle of miracles: that the Word who was with the Father from eternity, became flesh and dwelt among us? Now ascended to His glorious throne in heaven, He is with us still to lead, help and comfort us. This is the message we confess to our world and in which we ourselves find comfort: God is with us. In a world like ours, it is sometimes difficult to see that God is with us. While Yugoslavia was under Communist rule, a Christian man was imprisoned and tortured. Eventually, his hope and courage changed to despair. He finally took his own life but left the following note for his wife: "I have gone to remind God of a world he has forgotten." People often ask, "If there is a God, why all the suffering?" Why do bad things so often happen to relatively good people? Where is God as ungodliness grows around us? We need to remember that this world is a fallen world. It is a world in which our adversary, the devil, still prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking to frighten and devour us. So even though Christmas teaches us that God is with us, we must expect many trials and heartaches in this world.

Sometimes our conflicts come as a direct result of our confession of Christ and His word. Consider Stephen from the book of Acts. If Stephen had kept his faith to himself, or at least kept it inside the small circle of believers, he could have avoided conflict. But he loved his Saviour and his countrymen too much to let them perish in unbelief. It was Stephen's public confession of Christ that led to his death. In the same way, our confession of Christ and His Word can lead to conflict. Though none of us has yet experienced persecution to the extent that Stephen did, many of us have died "little deaths" for the sake of Christ. Perhaps that came in the form of conflict between a parent and a child, one of whom departed from the faith. Perhaps it came in the form of mockery from colleagues at work.

Christ assures us that God is with us. The narrative of Stephen gives us that assurance. Notice what Stephen did in the darkest hour of his persecution. "*He looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.*" (Acts 7:55).

It is in Christ that Stephen found the assurance that God was with him, in spite of his enemies and their threats. This same Christ, whom Stephen believed and confessed, had given up the riches of heaven, had come to earth and was born in a manger. This Christ, whom Stephen saw enthroned in heaven, is the same one who had suffered and died as the sacrifice for Stephen's sins. The Saviour who had paid such a great price for Stephen's salvation would never desert him in his hour of need. Seeing Christ gave Stephen assurance that God was with him.

Do we have that same assurance? We have not seen Christ visibly in the way that Stephen did. But we have seen Him just as certainly in His Word and Sacraments. Every time we read our Bible or devotion book or listen to a sermon, we see Christ and His love for us. We see how much He will never leave us or forsake us. Every time we come to the Lord's Table, we receive the very body and blood that Christ gave for the forgiveness of sins and we are assured again of our Lord's commitment to us even in our dark times. In this world we endure trials and troubles. Sometimes we suffer severely. But as we look to our Saviour, we see one who knows what it is to suffer. We see the one who once cried out to His Father, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" Because Jesus was forsaken by His Father as He bore

our sin for us, we know that we never will be left alone. As we gaze intently upon our Saviour, God demonstrates to us that He is with us, even in our worst suffering.

A Romanian pastor, tells of being imprisoned with another Christian who had been tortured terribly. When he and other prisoners would fret over their sorrows, this prisoner would say to them, "If the outlook is bad, try the up-look." Then he would remind them of how Stephen, when he was surrounded by hostile men who were about to stone him, looked up to Christ for courage. It is in the "up-look" that we also find courage, even when the outlook seems bad. We know that God is with us and we find courage to walk in the way of our Saviour. Emmanuel, God's word of promise gives us the comforting assurance that God is with us. It also gives us the courage to stand up for our Saviour who stood up for us on the cross, and now stands ready to give us the crown of everlasting life. Amen.