

God with Us

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[0 : 00] The scripture reading comes from Matthew chapter 1. Please follow along on the screen, the bulletin, or on your Bible. Starting in verse 18, we read, Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way.

When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet.

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us. When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.

[1 : 26] He took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus. This is the word of God. Thank you so much, Betty.

Welcome. Merry Christmas, everybody. Oh, that was about the best ever. That's great. My name is Chris. I'm one of the leaders here at Watermark.

Just really, really excited to see you, if it's your first time, if it's your thousandth time. I'm particularly excited to see what people wear at Christmastime, because I've seen some very exciting colors going on.

I looked in my wardrobe. The only red thing I could find was a Liverpool football shirt, so I thought that may not be appropriate. Let me just pray for us as we get into God's word.

Father, I thank you for Christmas. Thank you that today, in all the presents and all the stuff, all the food and the friends and the time together, Lord, I thank you that the central, key focus of everything is you.

[2 : 33] Thank you, Jesus.

Open our hearts to hear your word, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen. Great. We've got the kids in, so be prepared for a little bit of chaos, but that's fine, because we're a family together.

Christmas, do you know, actually didn't start as a celebration. There were no lights. There was no turkey. There was no presents. There was actually just confusion and hurt and darkness.

Christmas. Because, you know, Christmas actually started as a breakup. They were wedding planning. You know, they'd got the dress. They'd ordered the caterers.

They'd sent out the invites. And then one day, Mary, who's this young Jewish peasant girl, who's probably around 12 years old, comes to her fiancé, Joseph, and says, Joe, I'm pregnant.

[3 : 51] And Joe knew that he wasn't the father. And Mary continued that, it's an angel who came to me and said, the baby is from the Holy Spirit.

And Joseph, at that point, doesn't go, well, we believe all kinds of unscientific things these days, so that's fine. I mean, Holy Spirit conception, no problem. No, he doesn't.

He goes, Holy Spirit. Right. Right. That's a good one. And you see, at that point, at that moment, all of his plans, all of his trust in her, all of his dreams for a family were shattered.

And I can imagine him lying on his bed at night going, what have I done to deserve this? Like, why me? Because Joseph is a good guy. I mean, he loves her.

You can see from the passage, he loves her. And it says, even with this news, he doesn't want to shame her publicly. So he comes up with his own kind of solution of how to fix this mess, which is

like, okay, let's just do a kind of low-key, quiet divorce.

[4 : 59] Let's not kind of make this public. Let's make this the best of what we can. But Joseph is feeling alone and lost. Mary, what do you think she's going through?

I mean, she'd had this joy at the idea of being pregnant, and now it's been shattered by the rejection from her fiancé, and her life, her reputation, were on the line.

Because in first century Jewish culture, single mothers were not treated well. And for her, what was God up to?

What is he doing? Where is he even in the midst of this? Both of them confused. Both of them alone with their struggle, with their shame, with all the things that are going on, on the verge of breakup, and it's not their fault at all.

It's not their fault. And this is how Christmas begins. And so I don't know for you, many of you may have had an amazing 2021, but I know some of you, it's been a hard 2021.

[6 : 01] It's been one where maybe you're going, life doesn't make sense sometimes. Whether that's COVID, whether that's a loss of loved ones, whether that's sickness, or a whole lot of other things.

I know for many people, Christmas can be a hard time. But you know, Christmas is actually all about how God turns darkness into light. How God takes tragedy, and turns it into glory.

You see, it's how God turns expectations that we have, and the way we think life should work, upside down. And that's what God always does for everyone who trusts in him.

And the thing is, the Mary and Joseph story in this passage, actually come in the context of another breakup, which is a breakup which goes all the way back right to the beginning of the Bible.

Well, the breakup that is the backdrop for this story. You see, the Bible story says that you and I were made for a relationship with the creator God that we saw Annabelle and Justin so well talk about.

[7 : 08] And that relationship is that when we're with him, in right relationship with him, then we're home. And home is where you're safe, you're secure, you're known, and you're loved.

You've got nothing to hide. You can be who you are, you can be yourself because you are safe.

And the story goes, if you know the story and you've been in Watermark a while, but actually on page three of the Bible, everything goes wrong because it's not that God who walks out on us, but actually we walk out on him.

We want to live life our way, do things according to our plans, in our own self-reliant strength. And that's where everything goes wrong.

You see, my son Etienne, who's two years old, about a month ago, we were in the lift in my building and we were coming home and I was holding his hand just as the lift doors were opening and I was just getting out and then he lets go of my hand and he starts pushing me out of the lift.

Lovely son. And if he'd have managed to do that, you know, the doors would have shut and I think he'd have enjoyed his freedom for just a few seconds probably.

[8 : 29] You know, he'd have joined being there and not having me interfering in his life in any kind of way. He could do what he wants, but at some point, and I think for him it would come pretty quick, he'd realize that his little fingers couldn't reach the buttons for the open lift.

And you see, the very freedom that he thought he had without me had actually become a prison of his own making. Because he couldn't get out and when you're in that place, that's a place of stress, that's a place of anxiety, that's a place where you, it's all on you to try and fix this situation.

Because that's what it is to be alone and away from home. And that's often what we actually do with God in our lives. We say, I'll call you when I need you, but let me live my life, my career, my ambitions, my dreams by myself and it's all on us to try and make it happen.

And that's actually at the heart of what the Bible calls sin. Pushing God out so I can be on the throne, I can be in control of my life. And this is exemplified 700 years before this passage.

A prophet called Isaiah comes to a Jewish king called Ahaz. And this guy Ahaz, he's in a tough spot because his allies have just turned on him to try and force his hand to join them in resisting the big superpower of the time who's called Assyria.

[10 : 04] And he's besieged by this superior army. His back is against the wall. It doesn't look good at all. His whole kingdom, his life, his reputation, everything is on the line.

Tragedy is beckoning. And this prophet Isaiah comes to him and says, hey listen, Ahaz, don't trust in your own wisdom. Trust what God says to you.

And he's got this situation. It looks bad, but don't worry, he's got it. And do you know what Ahaz says? Ahaz says, sorry, Isaiah says, he'll give you a sign.

And the sign will be this, a virgin will conceive and bear a son and you shall call his name Emmanuel. And what does Ahaz do?

Well, like a male driver who's lost and won't admit it, he says, I'm going to sort this out myself, thank you very much. I don't need God's help. Let me deal with it.

[11:02] And do you know what happens? That decision leads to breakup. It leads to the end of his kingdom. It leads to the exiling of his people away from the home of where God was and where they were meant to be safe, secure, known and loved.

And unlike Mary and Joseph, this breakup with God and with their land and with the people, that was entirely their choice. Entirely their choice.

And the amazing thing is, though, that actually two chapters later on from this verse, in the midst of the chaos of what's going on, Isaiah comes with another promise.

He says, Emmanuel is still coming. The promise that in the darkness light will come and he says this, he says, unto us a child is born. Unto us a son is given and the government will be on his shoulders.

You see, what he was saying is, in spite of the chaos, there is a king who's coming. There is one who's coming to bring you home again. And the Jewish people for years were looking forward to this Messiah figure to come.

[12:13] They were looking forward to that, but they felt lost, alone, confused, and wondering in their current circumstances, where was God in the midst of this? Well, for many of us, some of us may see that God as absent.

Maybe that's because you don't believe in a God or maybe it's because you, like Mary and Joseph, look at your current circumstances and go, well, if God really cared, then he wouldn't allow me to be here.

And so, you end up feeling like you've got to carry life on your own shoulders. Maybe he's absent. Or maybe some of us are like Ahaz, that we see that maybe God comes to be with us, but actually that's bad news because you think he's there to give you a whole load of religious rules.

You think he's there to take control of your life and just disturb you and ruin you and make you feel kind of guilty about all the stuff that you're doing or you're not doing enough.

And maybe like a, you know, like a teenager whose parents say, hey, can I come and join you at your friend's Christmas party? And they go, no way, you're going to ruin everything.

[13:22] That's deep down how we actually think about God. Or maybe, we don't just see him as absent, maybe we don't see him as just with us but bad news, but maybe he's with us as like a distant uncle, a kind of non-interfering kind of deity who sends you an occasional Christmas card.

You can ask him occasional things, but actually, he just lets you live life the way you want to live it. Maybe that's your view of God. But the Christmas story here tells us that each of those views are wrong.

This passage tells us that whether we feel the suffering, the pain, like Mary and Joseph do, or whether we are the cause of suffering and pain, like Ahaz is, for all of us, the reality is we're away from home without God.

I showed a video a few years ago, I'm going to show it again in Watermark. It's from the movie Home Alone. Who's seen Home Alone? Okay, pretty good. I spoke to Tess yesterday and she was about the only person in the Christmas Eve service.

So, there's got to be a viewing for those of you who haven't seen it, like after the service. If you haven't seen it, okay, spoiler alert, Kevin, who is a young boy played by Macaulay Culkin, has wished that his family would disappear after having a fight with his family.

[14:50] The next day, he finds out they've gone on holiday and they've forgotten about him and he's left alone at Christmas time. And some burglars realize that he's alone and then they plan to break in.

And here's one of the things that Kevin does. Great, thank you. I don't know how he managed to fix all that stuff up in like less than 24 hours, but kids are smart these days.

You see, why do I show that to us? I think that actually gives a picture of what life is like when we're away from God. Because when you're away from home or when you're home alone, we actually feel insecure and we have to put up some kind of puppet show to try and keep out the threats from

our lives.

We pretend that we're fine. We get defensive when we're criticized. We work super hard to prove ourselves. We do a whole lot of things that other people think we're okay when deep inside we know that there's something missing.

because we feel the insecurity of the world around us. And these last couple of years we've really felt that, right? And if you're alone it's all on you.

[16:06] It's all on you. And it may feel like, you know, Kevin, it seems to work for a while but it's super tiring and super stressful if you've got to keep that up for the whole of your life. That's the breakup.

But Christmas doesn't kind of end with that kind of bad news. Christmas actually has something far more wonderful to tell us. It tells us actually that the very situations that we fear, the very situations that stress us that we go, what is going on?

That we, like Mary and Joseph, think are threats in our lives. When you get who God actually is, he turns them from potential catastrophe into what Lord of the Rings author J.R. Tolkien calls a eucatastrophe.

Catastrophe is something that turns unexpectedly bad. Okay? Something unexpectedly bad that happens. Eucatastrophe means good in Greek.

And it's so, a eucatastrophe and in his language is this. It's the sudden happy turn in a story which pierces you with a joy that brings tears.

[17:16] Let me read that again. I love that. He says, a eucatastrophe, a good catastrophe, is a sudden happy turn in a story which pierces you with a joy that brings tears.

You see, it's like receiving a letter from the Inland Revenue which you thought was asking you to pay more tax and just as you're in despair, you reread it and realize they're giving you money.

That happened to me this year. Okay? That's a eucatastrophe. For the angel, for Mary and Joseph, an angel comes to Joseph right when he's in the pit and says, don't fear.

Don't be afraid. What looks dark, I'm actually right in the midst of this. And for us, whether you're looking out at 2021 and going, what just happened?

or you're looking out into 2022 and you're going, I don't know what's coming. Things still seem out of control. He says, don't be afraid. Whether you go, hey, there's so much in my life, there's habits, maybe I'll make New Year's resolutions but I know I'm going to break them.

[18:26] There's things in my life, there's sin, there's shame, there's things here which are no right and you just feel like, oh. He says, don't be afraid. And for Joseph, he says, don't be afraid.

Take Mary as your wife because what she said is actually true. God is the one who is disturbing your life right now. It's not all going wrong, it's all going very right because it's better than you think it is.

This baby who's actually just rocked your entire world, you ought to call him Jesus. And the name Jesus means, okay, it's like with the kids, okay.

The name Jesus means God saves. Okay, you can remember that one for later. It means God saves. You see, the very hope that people have been waiting for and waiting for and waiting for for centuries, he's here.

He's here and he's disturbing your world and he quotes the prophecy from Isaiah that we mentioned before. He says, a virgin will give birth to a son and he will be called Emmanuel and then he just translates it in case you didn't get the message.

[19:40] He says, which means God with us. God with you. God with me.

God with us, not to nag us. God with us, not to control us. God with us, not to ruin our life or spoil our fun. God with us, to save us from ourselves, to save us from our sins.

God with us who can reach the buttons that we cannot get out of the prisons that we have made for ourselves because the chasm between us and God is too great for us to cross by ourselves but when we could not cross it, he has come down to us.

He has brought home to us. Jesus is God with us. He has not abandoned you. He has not left you. the creator of the universe is one who is neither distant nor disinterested. He has come to you. Both 2,000 years ago in that little manger but also today he comes again to us.

[20:46] You see, even when we walk away from home, he brings home to us. You see, he came from the glory of heaven into the slum of our lives and he didn't just come to be with us in the good times.

He's not our kind of fair weather friend. He came with us even to the depths of our darkness because he knows you, you know. He knows the depths of your shame. He knows the depths of your impatience, your unkindness, all the things that even you've been stressed about over this last little while.

He knows all of that. He knows the depths of your aloneness. He knows the depths of your pain. He knows wherever you are right now and he's there to be there with you right now.

And the reason you know he can be there with you right now is because he has been to the places where you cannot even imagine that you should be because he came, as Annabelle showed us, he came to die.

He came to take our shame. He came to take our aloneness. He came to take our sins on himself. He entered our self-made prisons and did a prisoner swap. He put himself there so that we could get out and be freed.

[21 : 56] He took the death sentence on himself so that our aloneness might never be a true aloneness. You know, actually, I just remembered, do you know what the Liverpool anthem song is?

Sorry, this is just a nostalgic moment for me. Okay, if you don't know it, you need to go home, along with watching Home Alone and play this, the Liverpool song is You Will Never Walk Alone.

Do you know, maybe I should have worn my shirt this morning, but Christmas says, if you come to Christ, you will never walk alone. You will never walk alone.

Because he says, I bring home to you to a place where you can be known, where you can be loved, where you can be safe, and where you can be secure with me. Because there's nothing to hide. Because he loves you even though he knows everything. And that's a place where we can quit the puppet show. It's a place where you don't have to fix your 2022.

[22 : 59] Because God, if God, the creator of the universe, who holds everything that you fear, every problem that you may face, he is bigger than it all. if he is with you, then that changes everything.

There may still be burglars outside. There may still be threats and insecurity in this world and in your life. There may still be pain in 2022. For many of us, there will be.

And some of us know that. But when he is with you, you can have joy even if family life is tough because you know you're not alone. You can have peace because no matter what's going on, it's not all on your shoulders any longer because Jesus is big enough to handle those things and you can give him your burdens.

And you can take one step at a time with him. You see, if Jesus is with you, then you can have hope that his love is strong enough to see you through whatever you're going to go through, whether it's going to be highs or whether it's going to be lows.

And that is a place of freedom. That is a place of confidence for this coming year. Because, you know, when home is hard, everything is hard. But when true home is with you, nothing can heal you like home can heal you.

[24 : 19] You see, my 10-month-old daughter, who Angeline I think is wonderfully looking after right now, sometimes she just cries and cries and cries.

And no matter what you try and do, she is just inconsolable. until she sees my wife. She doesn't see me. It's got to be my wife. And my wife picks her up and then suddenly she smiles again.

That's joy. Why does she get joy? I don't know why she doesn't work with me. Because she's safe. Because she's home. Because she knows that that's where she belongs.

And you know, you can look in a thousand places, but the promise of Christmas is only Emmanuel, God with us, can truly comfort and satisfy your soul.

And he's here. And he's calling us to respond to him today. Whether you are a Christian or you wouldn't even call yourself a follower of Jesus. So there's a breakup.

[25 : 29] The Christmas story has a bad news, good news story. Because against the bad news, the good news is the eucatastrophe that God has come to be with us.

How do we come and respond to him? It's my final thing. You know, my sister lives in Canada. I'm in Hong Kong. My parents are in the UK.

After we got married, I hadn't seen my sister for six, nearly seven years because things just didn't work out. Two years ago, we were in the UK, me and my wife with my parents, and it was Christmas Eve.

And we had all the food was ready, we'd prepared everything, everything was on the table, we were just about to eat, and then we hear this carol singing outside. And then there was this knock on the door.

And we went to the door and opened it, and there on the threshold, totally unexpectedly, was my sister and her family. we were going, wow.

[26 : 33] Now at that point, do you think we should have gone, hey, listen, we're like super busy, we haven't got food for you, so do you think you could maybe just come back another time?

Like, wouldn't that be nuts? Why? Because who cares if your life gets disrupted, family that was apart comes back together again?

Isn't that a far deeper, greater joy than turkey or whatever, right? You see, Isaiah said God would come, and at Christmas, God didn't break his promise.

He disrupted everything for Mary and Joseph, and you know, he'll disrupt everything for you too. you can't stay living life your way and have him with you, because you have to get out of the lift and only he will move you out there.

You can't stay trying to fix life your own way, your own problems, in your own strength, with the idea of either he's an absent God, he's maybe a distant God, he's a disinterested God. You can't stay like that and know joy, the joy of coming home, but actually this Christmas, the invitation to every one of us wherever you are is, will you open the door and let him in?

[27 : 53] Will you invite him into your life as your saviour, as your Lord, as the one that you're going to put your trust in this coming year, that he's going to be the one that no matter what happens, you know Emmanuel, God with us, and that is the greatest joy that you can have this Christmas.

Let me just pray for us, and maybe if you just, while the band comes up, maybe you just want to think about what's going on in your life, and how can you respond?

Are you going to leave Jesus on the doorstep with all your plans and busyness, or will you make him the centre of your life? Father, I pray that this Christmas, we'd realise you're better than we think you are.

We'd realise that actually all the great longings that we have in our hearts, all the desires that we have, good and bad, but all the things that actually we think we satisfy are ultimately just sunbeams pointing us to the sun, which is you.

And I pray that we would in our hearts realise and not stay one day longer away from you. Draw us to yourself this morning, we pray. Show us just what an amazing thing Christmas is.

[29 : 24] Lord, would we realise this is good news of great joy, not just for everybody else, but for us this morning. Thank you so much for sending your son to us.

Thank you for today. Lord, I pray that we would go out with great joy. In Jesus' name, Amen.