

Christmas Presence

“Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which translated means, “God with us.” Matthew 1:23

When the aftermath of Christmas morning was lying on the living room floor, and the last present was finally opened, my tears fell right next to the wrapping paper. Growing up, I was always so sad Christmas was over. I didn't want to take out the tree, stop singing the Christmas songs, or let go of the joy that came with the holiday season.

The other day, I was listening to Christmas music and the well-known song, “Where Are You Christmas?” came on the radio. The lyrics ask a lot of questions, such as:

“Why can't I find you?”

“Why have you gone away?”

“Where is the laughter you used to bring me?”

I know this is just a song, but there are a lot of people who ask the same questions this time of year. Sometimes it can seem like, although it's the Christmas season, it doesn't feel like Christmas. But what does Christmas *feel* like? And why does it seem like the feeling of Christmas leaves us on December 26th?

Well, friend, I'd dare say Christmas isn't a feeling; it's a Presence.

It's easier to think about Jesus at Christmas time. That's when most people will show up to church services for the first time in months and maybe even years. When Christmas is over and the last present is unwrapped, the ornaments are removed from the trees and the last carol sung, many will forget that Immanuel, God with us, is still with us. He won't be acknowledged much until the next holiday season.

There's a difference between acknowledging God, and experiencing Him. When Jesus was born, God literally came to earth to live among us. He is Immanuel, God with us. Can you imagine? What other religion do you know of where a god comes to his people? In many other religions, we have to reach for an unapproachable god. With Jesus, He humbled Himself and came to us (Matt 1:23 and Isa 7:14).

Think about this for a minute. God does not just look down at us from the unreachable heavens. He doesn't just observe us from afar. He doesn't sit on His throne and watch us as if He has nothing to do with our lives. He literally came to earth and took on the same flesh you and I have. He cried salty tears and felt the pain of a stubbed toe, restless nights, and the dread of waking up early in the morning. He is God *with* us.

When He died on the cross for us, He said He wouldn't leave us alone (John 14:18). Not only would He come back for us, but He also left us another Comforter, the Holy Spirit (John 14:16). God's presence did not only come in the flesh, was laid in a manger, and nailed to a cross. His presence now resides in us because upon salvation, we become His temple (1 Cor 6:19). Friend, we are NEVER without His presence; even when Christmas is over! He is and will always be closer than the breath in our lungs.

Does joy only come with the Christmas season? Do we forget about Jesus when the stores take down the inflatable snowmen and stock the shelves with candy hearts and February's holiday decor? If we do not experience His presence and only acknowledging Him during this time, we are robbing ourselves of the fullness of what Christmas is meant to be. We

will let the world dictate an end to Christmas when Christmas is literally an all year celebration when we know and understand God's presence is with us.

God is with us wherever we go (Josh 1:9). He is our strength and tells us not to fear because He helps us (Isa 41:10). And I love what Zephaniah says so much, I have to write it out for you. It says, "The Lord your God is in your **midst**, a mighty One who will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness; He will quiet you by His love; He will exult over you with loud singing" (3:17). How amazing is that? Don't let the gloom of Christmas being over keep you from the realization that God's presence is still with you. He rejoices over you because He delights in being a part of your life.

One of my friends said it best: "God loves each of us as if there was only one of us" (Nancy K). And His Word confirms that Christmas is God's presence coming for you (Isa 9:6). Jesus was born for you (Luke 2:11). It was a personal act so He could have a personal relationship with you and so you can experience His presence in your life.

Looking back on those early years of my life (and if I'm being honest, many of my adult years too), I realize why I was sad after Christmas. There is so much joy in the traditions of Christmas. I was focused on what the season brought and not Who the season was about. Sure, I acknowledged Jesus. I went to church, participated in the Christmas plays and told Jesus, "Happy birthday" on Christmas morning. But, I didn't experience Him.

So how can we experience Jesus all year and not just acknowledge Him during the holidays?

I love what Moses says to God in Exodus. Moses is the leader of the Hebrew people and he experienced God's presence like no one on earth. Moses understood the difference between a life that acknowledged God and a life that experienced His presence. Moses tells God, "If Your presence does not go with us, do not lead us up from here." I love that! He won't move unless God's presence goes with them. Do you realize that's what God does for us? His presence dwells among us (John 14:23). He goes before us, behind us and covers us on every side (Deut 31:8).

But Moses didn't stop there. It's important that we realize the difference between those who acknowledge God and those who experience Him. Moses proves the distinction when he says, "For how then can it be known that I have found favor in Your sight, I and Your people? Is it not by **Your going with us**, so that we, I and Your people may be **distinguished from all other people** who are upon the face of the earth?" There is a difference between those who celebrate Christmas and only acknowledge God and those who celebrate and experience Him. It's more meaningful. It's more than just family traditions and an acknowledgement of a God who was laid in a manger.

If you're like me, maybe you have a sense of sadness, disappointment or even a dread when the holidays are over. But, friend, I want to let you in on a truth many don't realize: the Presence of Christmas is always with us. We just have to continue to look to the manger and kneel at the cross to experience it.

My prayer for you this Christmas is that you experience God's presence all year long. I pray you will be as determined as Moses and refuse to go forward into the new year without God's presence going with you. You can experience Him, know Him and have more than just an awareness. You can experience the presence of Christmas today and every day, and just like Moses and the Hebrew people, the presence of God in your life will set you a part from everyone else on this earth.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, thank you for Your presence in my life. I thank you because the holiday season does not dictate your coming and going. I don't want to only acknowledge you at Christmas. I want to have an experience with you. I want to celebrate you beyond Christmas and know You like I've never known you. I invite Your presence into my life. I ask that You will make Your home with me and know me. Thank you for coming to this earth for me. Thank You because You are Immanuel, God with me. In Jesus' name, amen.