

“God With Us”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
Christmas Eve – December 24, 2012

**Luke 2: 1-20**  
**Isaiah 9: 2-7**

If there is something we can count on in life, it is that things will continue to change and move at a break-neck pace. As Americans who live in a 24-hour news cycle, we are bombarded by “breaking news alerts” which demand our immediate attention. Many times we see this as an improvement over our past, since more people are aware of what is going on in our world. And yet, I wonder if this has made us more anxious and fearful as humans, unable to differentiate between what we are told to pay attention to, and what we ought to pay attention to.

If each of us took a moment and looked back at where we were one year ago, what would we see that has changed? Children who are taller, smarter, and in a new place in life? Work which has changed in its responsibilities, locations, or colleagues? Health which has had numerous challenges, setbacks, or improvements? Friends who are new to our life, friendships which have changed in intensity or circumstance, friends who are no longer a part of our life? If you stop and consider what has changed over the last 365 days, I’m sure you will be amazed.

The same could be said of our life in the church. Changes in staff and lay leadership; welcoming new people and saying goodbye to long-time members; celebrating the birth of four babies in our congregation; celebrating the life of four saints who have now entered God’s heavenly kingdom. Change is a fact-of-life in the church, whether we admit it or not. John Knox celebrated its fiftieth anniversary on March 4, and during that service, I shared a very telling statistic: that of our 300 current members, over one-third have joined this church in the last 10 years. Our identity is not only formed by our past and tradition, but also by the changes we welcome with every new individual who walks through our doors. The last twelve months have been full of change for us as a people of faith.

Perhaps that is why – as individuals and as the church – we yearn for evenings like this. We look forward to the ritual which we tell our busy lives we must stop for, and with family, friends, and Christians, we seek God’s presence. We come hoping for memories rekindled, even though much has changed. We come listening for the familiar story, even though it has new things to speak to us. We come yearning for a return to how things once were, even though living in the past will never allow us to live faithfully into our promised future. Amid all the change and busyness we feel, we seek a night which calms our fears and reminds us, once again, that we will not be forgotten.

That, I believe, is why this night is so important each and every year. For in the midst of our ever-changing world and seemingly chaotic lives, we are summoned to go to Bethlehem, “to see this thing which has taken place.” We are told that a wonderful counselor and king of kings has come near to us this day. We are told that despite their fear, their worry, and their uncertainty, a young couple was faithful and obedient, trusting that their God would not leave them and would take care of them. We are told, as we are told every year, that a Savior has been born, and we are called to follow the star to Bethlehem, so that we might pay him homage. We are summoned to go to Bethlehem, to witness this thing that God has done.

And while we experience significant change in our lives, we are not alone. Mary and Joseph trudged to Bethlehem, only found an animal’s stall in which to rest and stay, and in the cold of that night, she gave birth to her baby boy. But they were not left alone. Soon, shepherds from the fields came and celebrated his birth. Kings would travel and surround them with gifts and adoration. God promised them that he would be with them, and through those surrounding that manger 2000 years ago, God embodied that promise.

So we gather again this evening to hear this promise, to be told that born to us is a Savior, the Messiah, our Lord. We come together to be reassured that he will be our Wonderful Counselor, our Mighty God, our Everlasting Father, our Prince of Peace. We seek to believe once again that the deep darkness all around us will be pierced by the great light which shines on us. Amid all that is us this Christmas Eve, we yearn again to hear and believe God’s promise.

But if we wish to hear clearly the promise of this night, we might first need to honestly ask: who are we this Christmas Eve night?

We may be here with great stress in our hearts, worried about any number of things. A child struggling in school, a parent in declining health, a friend in a precarious situation, a marriage full of strain and distance – whatever the cause, we may be here tonight weighed down by anxiety and concern. How can we hear God’s promise anew tonight?

We may be here with a heavy heart, overwhelmed by loss and grief. This may be the first Christmas – or one more of several Christmases – without our spouse, our parent, our child, our friend. We may be suffering over a broken friendship, a painful separation, or an opportunity missed. How can we hear God’s promise anew tonight?

We may be here feeling as if everything is going great. Work is fulfilling, family is healthy, faith is secure – at least for all we know, life seems to be good. We aren’t living in denial, for we know how tough life can become, but we are grateful for where we are right now. How can we hear God’s promise anew tonight?

We may be here with a hardened heart, wrestling with the walls we have built to protect us. We feel safer if we keep our guard up, not wanting to be hurt again. Yet, deep down, we feel unsettled, unhappy, unfulfilled, and

we are struggling with how to proceed. How can we hear God's promise anew tonight?

No matter who we are, God meets us tonight. No matter where we come from, God leads us tonight. No matter why we are here, God speaks to us tonight.

No matter our circumstance, our past, our personal story – no matter who we are, God is with us tonight. That is because God made a conscious decision, a deliberate choice, a sacrificial act to give us himself, in flesh and blood. God did not have to do this – in fact, it was a foolish choice, if looked at rationally. Thank goodness God does not act like we would – hesitant, fearful, selfishly. Instead, God acted boldly, courageously, selflessly – and because of that gift of love, we are here tonight, grateful once again for this babe wrapped in bands of cloth (walking over and unwrapping the bread for communion).

No matter who we are, no matter where we come from, no matter why we are here, God's gift of grace in Jesus Christ is with us. And we celebrate his presence, his grace, his love, his challenge, his patience – we celebrate God with us whenever we eat this bread and drink this cup. This meal connects us to God, renews our relationship with God, and nourishes us for the journey ahead of us. And on a night like this, when we come seeking so much from so many different destinations, what a gift we have been given to center us, calm us, and renew us, again and always.

On this holy night, may we hear with renewed hearts, minds and souls what the angels first announced to lowly shepherds:

“Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

Alleluia! Amen!