

Dec 26 2010 John 1:1-14

GOD IS WITH US

Merry Christmas! It's the most 'wonderful time of the year' the old song goes. There are lights glowing, presents given, meals shared, cookies baked, and all is well. Peace and joy have been shared as families gathered to celebrate another Christmas. Songs sung, the Christmas story heard and all is well. By now some are tired. Those who work in stores have had only a few hours of rest to enjoy their holiday and then they were back at it again this morning. Stores, at least Macys was open at 6 a.m. this morning with their after Christmas sales which they began to advertise a few days before Christmas. That means those employees had to be there pretty early. I'm sure like those early shoppers on Black Friday there were people in line before the doors opened. Holiday high school basketball tournaments begin tomorrow, football bowl games seems to dominate this week and New Years day. It becomes a busy time. Maybe too busy for some. The stores try their best to recoup or even get ahead in the finance department so they have the after Christmas sales going on right as we meet this morning. Perhaps some of you will be tempted to go shopping a little later today just to see if there is that one thing you just can't do without today. While some attend church, others are shopping. It seems, and I don't mean to be sarcastic, that even the Sunday after Christmas has become, well just another day in the year. The joy of Christmas sometimes is short lived. The focus of Christmas perhaps has been set aside. We've been to church, opened the presents clothes have been tried on and it's time to decide, should I or shouldn't I return that gift? That's nothing new. It happens every year. Next year will be a unique year because Christmas Eve will be Saturday and Christmas will fall on, of all days, a Sunday. Can you imagine someone coming to church Xmas Eve and Xmas Day? I hope both services will be jammed packed just like some concerts we read about who have star power. We have star power too. He doesn't sing. He

doesn't play a guitar. He doesn't even have a band, though he does have a bunch of followers and he does amazing things like healing people, transforming lives and greatest of all, giving those who trust in him eternal life. His name is Jesus...I can give you a backstage pass to meet him anytime.

But when Monday comes next year following Christmas....well get those doors open for the after Christmas rush to exchange gifts and to buy new things that are on sale. It's a tradition. No wonder the wise men couldn't find where the baby was born. Everyone was out shopping for the gifts advertised in the Bethlehem Herald. "Hear ye, Hear ye," the town crier called. "Big sale at Rosie's. Half price sale on all items while they last. Extra 25% with coupons from today's Bethlehem Herald. Use your Roman Visa card and save another 10%."

But we forgot something. We forgot that over 2,000 years ago the most wonderful thing that could ever happen happened when a little baby was born in a manger and the shepherds heard the songs of the angels proclaiming the birth of the Savior. And ever since that time, God has been with us. One hymn in our hymnal says, "God came down at Christmas, Love all lovely, Love divine; Love came down at Christmas star and angels gave the sign."

The apostle John put it best in his Gospel of Good News when he said, "*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*"

Folks that's something to remember. The church isn't just a Christmas and Easter thing. If it was then we wouldn't need the church the other 50 weeks in the year. Look at the Christian calendar and see Advent as preparing us for Christmas in which we celebrate the coming of God's Son to bring life. "For today in the city of Bethlehem the Savior has

been born: the angels told the shepherds. Lent comes upon us to remind us of God's Son journey on this earth toward what he came to do, that is to bring salvation. During Lent we remember his suffering and his stories and his healings and as he comes toward Jerusalem we are told of his rejections, the struggles with Jewish leaders who wanted him out of their lives. Then we have what we call Holy Week, the last week of his life and we go the way of the cross until the Last Supper, Good Friday, his trial, death and resurrection. "He lives" we sing because now he is alive forever more. Then Pentecost comes and we learn of the power of the Holy Spirit that transformed the disciples and the world. We learn how that same Holy Spirit is living today in the hearts that surrender to God's Son. It seems we come full circle every year to remember the stories that have been passed on year after year less we forget our Jesus lives and our God reigns. And in between we have his ministry throughout the land. Or we look back at the Old Testament and see God's hand working and preparing the people for his son's coming. We learn from these stories about God's love and caring. We learn that our faith is an everyday walk with God where we learn more and trust more. We learn God can do anything. We learn without God our lives are often in a mess. He provides manna everyday for his children. That was something John wanted the world to remember. Once the Word was with God, was God, and that Word left his throne above to humbly come to this earth to live among us in the form of his only begotten son. He came to bring hope to the world. He came to teach us how to love one another. He came to bridge the gap between heaven and earth with his cross. He came to forgive our sins and restore a broken relationship with God by his death on that cross. He came to give us victory over death by rising again. He did it so that we might have life eternal. And, that with him living in us, to give us a better life today. "Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her king. Let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sings" we sing at Christmas. We also sing "Go tell it on the mountain over the hills and everywhere. Go! Tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born." That

story, that hymn should be our theme song. We come to hear God's voice; we go to tell the world the story of Jesus' love for the world.

Christmas Eve morning I heard a WW II veteran tell his story. He must have written a book, or else someone wrote one about his experiences in WW II. I gathered from his conversation that he had been a prisoner of war in Japan and I guess he went through some tough times in the concentration camps. His story they say is powerful. This humble man shared how when WW II was over and he got out of the service he married but could not deal with his past time in those camps. I guess he had nightmares and all that and those things led to his drinking and that drinking almost cost him his marriage. One day this fellow somehow ended up at a Billy Graham tent revival in California. Something got his attention. Rather Someone. God did! He heard the bells of Christmas go off in his head that rang loud and clear that the answer to all his problems was waiting for him in a room where someone would share the story he needed to hear. After listening to Billy preach this fellow made his way down the aisle to the room where he and others were told about God's forgiveness through the grace and love of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and they were invited to pray the sinner's prayer and invite the Savior into their hearts. This man did that and a release from all that he was dealing with came upon him. It was as if a heavy burden was lifted. He felt light and full of joy. He walked into that tent meeting a skeptic and sinner and came out of there renewed in his spirit knowing he was a sinner saved by the grace of God as an overwhelming awe of God's presence could be felt in his heart and all hate for those who had hurt him were gone. I don't know if that is exactly how it went down, but I know the end result, at that tent meeting he gave his heart to Jesus. I don't know the rest of the story, but one result was that sometime later he went back to Japan to find those who were his guards in the concentration camp and to forgive them for what they had done to him and other prisoners of WW II. When the interviewer

called him a hero he humbling said not him. He said those of today and of yester year are the heroes for giving limbs and their lives. They are the true heroes.

That is the story of Christmas. That is the story of God living with us in this world. God's love touching one person who turned around and showed that love to someone who had mistreated him. You see he could have harbored all those ill feelings right to his death and maybe be justified, but you know, he would never have found true peace. He might have ended up divorced from his wife and who knows how many other failed marriages he might have had. Or worse. He could have become an alcoholic, or even a street person who went through this time on earth with hurts so deep that they would ruin his life forever. He could have left this life without ever having known about Christ the Savior born to set men free and been bound for hell separated from God forever. But for him, a tent revival, a meeting with Christ changed all that. War, as they say, is hell. Hate is a dirty word. Envy is a dirty word. Forgiveness is something too many people hold back because they would rather continue to go to their graves with that anger on their minds instead of doing what God commands us to do...to forgive. If Jesus could forgive those who beat and nailed him to the cross, I think maybe we should be able to ask his assistance to help us to forgive someone who has done something to us. This man did. Coorie Ten Boom did as she forgave the German guard that beat or had her sister and others in that concentration camp beaten and killed, all with the help of God who is with us always.

God is with us today. That's the meaning of Christmas. He comes to bring peace and joy and offer his grace to all who will receive him. It's the gift that keeps on giving. Christmas might be just one day on the calendar, but Christ lives in every person who has surrendered to him, and that means he lives daily amongst us. He is in the person who holds a door open for someone who is carrying packages. He is in the waitress that smiles and brings you your meals. He is in the person in the car next to you who gives way in

order for you to get in line. Oh, we may not see Christ in them, but you know, I bet he is there. He's in the eyes of a happy child that receives one gift because his family is poor. After all, we are all made in the image of God.

So even though Christmas day had come and gone and the mess is still there to be cleaned up, when you take down the tree and place the ornaments in their boxes remember the joy of Christmas and that even though Christmas stuff will be put away till another year, God's is still here. Don't be like the unnamed innkeepers who didn't have room for Mary and Joseph when she was about to deliver her baby. They may not have cared much about her situation so they turned them away. Be a little like the last innkeeper who said he didn't have any room in the inn for them, but hey, he had a place out back where they could find a place to rest with the animals. It wasn't much but it would provide a place for Mary to give birth. And who knows how God might have blessed that innkeeper throughout his remaining years. While other inns might have closed down, maybe, just maybe this one was thriving. All because the heart of that innkeeper was touched by a lady and a man who were about to be parents. And I would not be surprised if this blessed innkeeper didn't know why he was being blessed. But we do today. Because of a little bit of kindness he showed to a couple about to have a baby. Who knew who this baby would turn out to be? He certainly didn't. Truly God is with us always.

And as we know this is a week of transition because next Sunday will be the first Sunday of the New Year. 2011 will be upon it with all its mysteries, all its joys, its sorrows, its heartaches, its disappointments and its victories and so much more. But the one thing we will never have to worry about. In all of that....in all that we do....in all that we might go through....God is with us. For from the beginning of time God has been there for his people. In the garden with Adam and Eve, in Abraham's journey, in Egypt with the

Hebrew nation, in their walk to the promise land, God was with his people. And today, through the power of the Holy Spirit and the resurrection of Jesus he is with us still.

The concluding narration of the music the choir sang for us this Advent season states, ‘When we are in the presence of the Lord, we feel his holy peace, and all is well. Because of Christ’s birth, all is well between God and us. For through this great gift from heaven, we are reconciled with God and can experience holy peace in our souls and new life in Christ...Some scholars believe the word ‘Nowell’ began as a shortened form of the phrase ‘now all is well.’ In old England perhaps people used this as the Christmas greeting.”Christ is born,” to which would come the response, “Nowell.” Now all is well.”

Christmas isn’t over. It continues on. For Christ has been born, Nowell, all is well! That’s the message of Christmas. It goes along with the message of Easter that reminds us that he lives, he lives salvation to impart. That’s not just a message for the seasons, its God message for the world. So may it be today for the entire world as we continue to celebrate the reign of our Lord and Savior until he comes again in his glory. Hope to see you each Sunday as we learn the stories that transform a heart and give hope to those who trust in the God who is with us always.

So Merry Christmas once again, and may you have a happy and blessed new year.