



Reader's Digest did an online survey of people from 16 countries asking, What's your greatest fear? But they only gave them four options: Loosing your looks, going broke, speaking in public, and being alone. Almost across the board, being alone ranked the highest. The only exception to that was the French. They fear public speaking more than being alone. At first that surprised me but then I thought about the times I've been to France and it made sense. They like to be alone!

But let's face it, many people fear being left alone, especially at Christmas. Here's a few people with this fear who might surprise you: Oscar-winning actress Anne Hathaway confessed, "Loneliness is my least favorite thing about life. The thing that I'm most worried about is just being alone without anybody to care for or someone who will care for me." Joss Whedon, director of the movie *The Avengers*, said, "Loneliness is about the scariest thing out there." Scientist Albert Einstein wrote, "It is strange to be known so universally, and yet to be so lonely." Marilyn Monroe said, "Sometimes I think the only people who stay with me and really listen are people I hire, people I pay."

The idea of fear plays a big part in the Christmas story. The angel came to Mary and she was "greatly troubled" but the angel said, "Don't be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God." After the baby was born, the angel also showed up to the shepherds. The glory of the Lord shone around them; they were terrified, but the angel said, "Don't be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people."

But the part of the story I want to focus on has to do with Joseph. When Joseph found out Mary was pregnant he was terrified by the implications. He knew he hadn't been with her, which meant she'd been unfaithful to him. As he was trying to figure out what to do about this, the angel appeared to him in a dream and said, "Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a Son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

So that must have helped, but what I want to focus on today is what comes next in this text. Matthew adds his own comment in verses 22-23, and says, "**All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' (which means "God with us").**"

You know that song we like to sing that says, "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." That's quite a claim! All humanity's desires and longings, all of our anxieties and fears find their resolution or fulfillment in the birth of Jesus. And I believe the reason for that is found in one single word from the text: Immanuel. It's just one word in the original but the translation is three words. Immanuel means "God with us." Immanuel is the cure to loneliness. Fear not! Do not be afraid! Why? Because Jesus is Immanuel, God with us.

Let's look at this from three angles. First, Jesus is **God** with us. Second, he's God **with** us. Third, he's God with **us**.

Jesus is GOD With Us

Let's start with Jesus is **God** with us. This simple but startling claim is what Christmas is all about. The creator of the universe, the infinite and eternal God, has become a human being. Everything else about Christmas is just window dressing. All the lights and gifts and parties and traditions that make us feel all warm inside are peripheral to this.

You might ask, where else does it say that? Well, the apostles all referred to him as God. John said, "***In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us***" (*John 1:1,14*). Paul says Jesus is "***the image of the invisible God***" (*Col. 1:15*).

You see it in the claims Jesus made about himself. His teaching was very self-centered. This set him apart from all the other great religious teachers of the world. They all pointed people away from themselves and said, "That's the truth; follow that." But Jesus said, "I'm the truth, follow me!" No one ever said such a thing. He said things like: "I'm the bread of life. I'm the light of the world. I'm the resurrection and the life. I'm the way, the truth and the life." He said, "Come to me. Follow me. Believe in me."

Then he was constantly saying things and doing things to identify himself with God. He even used the divine name that God gave to Moses to refer to himself. He said, "***Before Abraham was born, I Am!***" (*John 8:58*). Do you know what the Jews did when they heard that? They picked up stones to stone him. Why? Because "I AM" is God's holy name. In their minds, that's a direct claim to be God!

Jesus claimed to do things only God had the prerogative to do. People brought a paralyzed man to him and before he did anything he said, *“Son, your sins are forgiven”* (Mark 2:5). Think about that. How can Jesus forgive sin if he’s not God? When people around him heard it, they said, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” If Jim punches Joe in the nose and then you walk up to Jim and say, “I forgive you for that,” it means nothing. Only Joe can forgive Jim. Forgiveness has to come from the one who’s been wronged. Sin is an offense against a holy God. So when Jesus says your sins are forgiven he’s claiming to be God.

Among all the religions of the world, the Jews believed there’s only one God and he alone is to be worshipped. But do you know what Thomas did after the resurrected Jesus appeared to him? Thomas had heard from others that Jesus was alive, but he said, “I’ll never believe unless I see him with my own eyes and touch him with my own hands.” But then Jesus showed up to Thomas and said, “Here I am, Thomas. Go ahead and touch me.” Do you remember what Thomas said, *“My Lord and my God!”* (John 20:29). Do you know what the most amazing thing is about that? Jesus didn’t argue with him. Any good Jew would have rebuked Thomas and said, “You can’t say that. We worship one God.” But Jesus didn’t say that. He rebuked Thomas for his unbelief, not for his worshipping him as God.

What’s amazing is the people who were closest to him, who lived with him in the closest quarters for three years, claimed he was without sin! You can’t fool people you live with. You want to know what I’m really like? Ask my family. But it was the people who knew Jesus best who said he was without sin. The apostle Peter, probably his closest friend, said of him, *“He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth”* (1 Peter 2:22). Can you imagine saying that of anyone? We all slip up in what comes out of our mouth, but Peter never heard one word from him that was in any way deceitful.

I could go on and on. But let me ask you, have you wrestled with his exclusive claim to be God? By the way, this explains the irritating exclusivity of the Christian faith, setting it apart from all other religions. This is why Christians are sometimes accused of being narrow-minded. If Jesus is really who he said he was, then we have to be narrow-minded at least about this one thing. Every other religion says, “Our founder was a great teacher and if you just follow his morals you’ll be saved.” The Christian faith says, “Jesus is God and there’s no other way but through him. It’s not about your morals; it’s about faith in him and in him alone.”

That sounds narrow-minded but suppose you’re really sick and go to all these doctors and they all say, “It’s not serious. Just rest and drink lots of fluids and you’ll be fine.” But then you come to me and I say, “Listen, you’re terminal unless you take this medicine.” How would you respond? Would you say, “That’s narrow-minded.” No! You’d say, “You’re either right or you’re

wrong, and I need to find out if you’re right.” Sometimes the truth, the remedy is narrow-minded. The truth we celebrate at Christmas is that Jesus isn’t just a way, but **the** way. He’s **God** with us. We might be mistaken about that; we might be crazy; but we might be right, and if we’re right, it doesn’t matter if we’re narrow-minded.

Jesus is God WITH Us

The second angle is a little easier to swallow for some of you. Not only is Jesus **God** with us, he’s also God **with** us. Before Jesus was born, the idea of God being with people was terrifying. God appeared to Job in a whirlwind. On Mt. Sinai there was thunder, lightning and a thick cloud over the mountain. The Lord descended on the mountain in fire and the smoke billowed up from it like it was a furnace. The whole mountain, including everyone in the camp, trembled violently (Exodus 19:16-19).

On another occasion, Moses said to God, “Show me your glory.” The Lord replied, “I can’t let you see my face because no one can see me and live, but if you go stand in the cleft of that rock I’ll pass by and let you see just my back side” (Exodus 33:18-23). And that’s what he did.

Years later, after Solomon built the Temple and they brought in the ark of the covenant, it says a dark cloud filled the temple and the priests couldn’t even perform their service they were so freaked out (1 Kings 8:10-11). Every time God showed up he was terrifying.

Imagine Job or Moses or Solomon hearing these words from John 1, *“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth... No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known”* (verses 14, 18). If they had heard that, they’d have jumped up and down and said, “Do you realize what this means? You can see God in the person of Jesus, and he’s not terrifying. He came as a baby. He came as one of us to save us.”

This is the mystery of what we call the incarnation. In his book *Miracles*, C.S. Lewis says the incarnation was like a person diving for pearls. He takes off his clothes, dives into the water, rushes down through green, warm water into the cold darkness; down through increasing pressure into the deathlike region of ooze and slime; then up again, back to the light, his lungs bursting, till suddenly he breaks surface, holding in his hand the dripping, precious thing that he went down to recover. That’s the story of the incarnation. In Jesus, God stripped himself naked and plunged into the murky waters of humanity. He vanished as he plunged deeper and deeper into the oozy waters of our life. He did that for us. He did it to seek and find and raise up to new life something incredibly precious to him: you and me.

What an amazing story! A nice, decent god would probably send us some help, maybe an angel or advice of some sort. We'd probably consider him a god we could respect, admire and maybe even fear. But the God of Scripture goes radically beyond that. Yes, he sends his angels, but at Christmas, God didn't stand on the wharf and send some religious advise. He personally jumped in the putrid waters. He became vulnerable for us. There's nothing more vulnerable than a fetus swimming in amniotic fluid. Nothing more vulnerable than a newborn baby. It's shocking! It's crazy, over-the-top, love! The God of the Bible—the God of Christmas—is much better than we could ever imagine! He's God **with us**.

Jesus is God with US

This brings us to the last angle: He's God with **us**. Immediately, this begs the question, How can he do this? How can he be with **us**? Who are we to think the God of the universe would come to us?

It's important to know when he says God with **us** he doesn't mean everyone. When you read the New Testament you see who those people are for whom the sign came. You see it right here in the Christmas story. First, the angel comes to two peasants from a podunk town called Nazareth. They're nothing special, other than the fact both of them displayed a willingness to go along with God's plan. Then he comes to shepherds. Shepherds were considered the lowest of the low. They weren't even allowed in the temple. And then you see the kinds of people Jesus chose to be his disciples. For the most part, he didn't choose the religious people who seemed to have their act together with God. He chose uneducated fishermen, unethical tax collectors, even prostitutes. He was always being accused of associating with the wrong kinds of people, but all of them had one common denominator: they all knew their need and they saw something in Jesus that met that need.

Martin Luther was very religious. He was a priest. He confessed his sins twice a day. He taught in a seminary. But he didn't really know God; he even says he hated God because he never felt he could do enough to please him. In a sense he was like the person who thought he knew what God was like, and he was terrified by him, but he hadn't really met God personally. He knew God but not God with us. Then Luther began to study Paul's letter to the Romans, especially Romans 1:17, which says, "*For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written, 'The righteous will live by faith.'*" He said, "I'd always hated the idea of the righteousness of God because it meant I'd be punished as an unrighteous sinner." He knew he couldn't live by faith because he wasn't righteous. He was terrified by God. But then as he meditated on that verse he made a discovery: the righteousness of God is the gift which comes to us not by trying hard to be righteous but by

faith. You can't earn it; no one is good enough to earn it; and it's only those people who see that who can receive the gift of God by faith. He says when he realized that he felt as if he'd entered paradise itself. In a sense Luther moved from seeing Jesus as God to being God with **us**.

The **us** are all those people who Jesus called "poor in spirit." That's how Jesus introduced the greatest sermon ever given. He said, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit*" (Matthew 5:3). He's not talking about being economically poor, he's talking about being poor in spirit. That means we see our moral bankruptcy in his sight; we see our desperate need for him. We come to him out of that need; cry out to him for mercy to trust he's met that need through the death of his Son. Jesus said he came to seek and to save the lost. He said, "I didn't come for those who are healthy. I'm a doctor. I came for those are sick and know it. I came to make those kinds of people well."

Don't forget, Immanuel had another name, too. The angel said, "Call him Jesus because he'll save his people from their sins." Who does he save? His people. Who are his people? People who know and confess their sin and look to him for forgiveness. Matthew's readers would have been shocked by this idea. They thought the Messiah would save them from the sin of others, not their sin. But it's our own sin he saves us from and it's only those who know that and want that who can be saved.

Jesus is **God** with us. He's God **with us**. He's God with **us**. Let me give you three ways you can apply this to your life, particularly as it pertains to the idea of "Fear Not."

First, trust him in everything. As Christians, it's not just God with us but it's also God **for** us and God **in** us. If all that's true then we have to remove the limitations we've placed on him in our lives. What are the things in your life that you tend to think, "Well, I just have to live with that. God can't really change me in that department." What are the fears you live with? If it's true God is with us, we don't have to be afraid of anything; there's nothing too big for him.

Second, get near to him. If God went to such great lengths to be with us, shouldn't we do everything we can to be with him? The Bible says, "*Draw near to God and he will draw near to you*" (James 4:8). Sometimes, without even realizing it, fear keeps us away from him, as it did with Luther. Christmas is all about getting near to him. Look what he did to be near to you; what's keeping you from drawing near to him? Is it too much for you to get up 30 minutes earlier to be with him?

Third, give yourself to him totally. If you believe Jesus is God with us then any other response but complete surrender to him is unthinkable. To be lukewarm and tepid towards him makes no sense at all. John Stott wrote, "Anybody who ever met Jesus

Christ only ever had three responses to him. They either were terrified and wanted to run away, or they hated him and wanted to kill him and stone him to death, or they worshiped him and got down on their knees and gave him everything." The one option that's not there is to be lukewarm and tepid about it. But what often keeps us from that? It's fear. We fear what he will ask us to do. We fear losing something precious to us.

*I am indebted to Tim Keller in his sermon "God With Us," for the basic outline of this message.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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