

Christmas Eve
- Pastor Kari Pancoast

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Immanuel, God with us. Amen.

We've been reading through the Bible as story again this year during worship. We've been reading it as the story of God bringing us back to himself. We started in the beginning, of course, with creation. God created all that there is for himself to love—to give him joy and companionship! We were created to belong to God. But things didn't last the way God intended for very long. We read about the fall—about how sin entered the world. The purpose we had been created for was lost. Sin destroyed the perfect world God had made for himself. God's precious creation was a mess! It was trapped in sadness and selfishness, evil intentions and godlessness. Even God's people turned away from him and turned inward on themselves. We rejected God, ignored God, put ourselves in his place... We ignored his love for us and for each other. God's precious world was miserable. It was full of hate and despair and hopelessness. It was trapped in chaos!

But God loves his creation, especially us, his precious children, too much to just let it all go. So God put a plan in action; a plan to rescue his people; a plan to bring it all back to himself and his amazing love.

So we've been reading this plan; we've been reading about how God is bringing us all back. He chose Abraham and Sarah through whom to put this plan into action. He promised that through them he would bless the whole world. He promised that he would always be their God and that they would be his people; he would be faithful to them! We've been reading about how God has been faithful to his promise. We've followed the story of God's faithfulness and love for his people through generations and generations of their sin and their rejecting God. We have seen how God is always faithful. Even in the worst that his people can dish out, God sends his messengers to remind the people that they belong to God and he won't forget them. "Return to the God who loves you," these messengers said. "But we don't know how!" was the response. And they didn't. They needed someone to rescue them.

We have been waiting for the savior, that rescuer that God has promised. And now finally, here we are, celebrating that God has kept that promise to rescue us, to bring us back to himself. The savior has come to us. We've been reading through the Bible as story this year, so we will know that this is our story. This isn't just some fairy tale. It isn't just a story of people long ago that is fun to read for the adventure it tells or because we hope to learn some good life lessons from it. **It is our story.** We've been reading the Bible as story because it is our story of how God loves us and brings us back to himself because we belong to him.

So tonight we read, "In those days, a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David." This is real. This story of God coming to us in Jesus the savior is anchored in real time and real place, and in the real lives of real people. But it isn't just a story we remember of how Jesus came long ago as the baby who was laid in the manger. It is the story of how Jesus continues to come to us to be our savior, to be God with us!

This story of Jesus, the story of Emanuel— which means God with us—is our story. We could tell the Christmas story this way, "In these days, when Curt Zimbelman was mayor of Minot, God comes to his people; God comes to his people in the love he has for us in our Savior Jesus. "

Maybe your story continues this way. "In these days, a decree went out that the whole valley would have to evacuate." And we saw Jesus present with us as people helped each other. Jesus showed up in the strangers who came to help evacuate. Jesus came in the volunteers who helped with the gutting and mucking and clean up. He came in those who provided free meals in the valley all summer. Jesus is here in those who are helping their

friends and neighbors rebuild, who are storing their stuff in their garages this winter, who are working on future flood protection. Jesus is here in the Tree of Hope that provided Christmas decorations for those who had lost theirs. Jesus is here among us in our caring for each in this time. He is here offering us love and peace and hope.

Or maybe this is your Christmas story this year: "In these days, the doctor said it doesn't look good." And Jesus came among us in our need. We saw Jesus present with us in the care we receive from doctors and nurses, neighbors, family... the prayers and the hot dishes, the kind words and phone calls, the cards and the visits. Grandpa's last days were filled with love and peace because the love that God has for us in Jesus surrounded us in that hospital room.

Or this might be a common Christmas story: "In these days, we're feeling totally overwhelmed with life... My business was flooded and is in chaos so I can't find anything. The kids are involved in so many activities that I feel like all I do is drive them from one thing to another. Things are so busy in town these days that even going to the grocery store is a major undertaking." But Jesus comes to me in the chaos and offers me peace as a friend offers me help with the kids. Jesus comes to me in my friend's invitation to coffee, the warm smile and conversation with a stranger in the grocery checkout line. Jesus comes to me and offers me hope in the hard work and extra hours my coworkers are putting in to help get the business back in order. Jesus fills me with peace and hope and joy, even in the midst of life's busyness.

Or maybe this is your Christmas story this year: "In these days I made decisions I am not proud of. I wish I could go back and change the past." But Jesus is here in the forgiveness he offers you. He is here in the new start, the opportunity to do things differently from here on out. He is here offering you love and grace and new life that only come from him.

The Christmas story isn't just a faded memory... a story we read year after year for the nostalgia of it. It is the story of Jesus coming to us, coming into our world and bringing us back to himself. It is the story of Jesus coming and rescuing us from our despair and hopelessness, from the sin and chaos of the world. Christmas is the story of God coming to us in Jesus our Savior, our Rescuer, God-with-us so we can know God's love and mercy in our lives. May this Christmas story be new for you again tonight so you can recognize Jesus with you right here and now as our Savior who is bringing us back to himself! Amen.