



Pastor's Note

"With"

Every so often, someone says something that stops you in your tracks, makes you stand still, and forces you to ponder what they said. Several years ago, when I was still pastoring my first church, just such a thing happened while I was at a committee meeting for the presbytery. The Stated Clerk of the presbytery was addressing our committee as we "wordsmithed" a statement of some kind, and she said "remember – the theology is in the prepositions."

As I said, that statement jumped out and grabbed my attention, because it's so very true. Those little words we call prepositions – words like "on," "under," "over," "after," and the like – are words which define the *relationship* among or between things. And at its core, the Christian faith is one all about relationships. Jesus Himself summed up the whole of the Law and the Prophets with the two Great Commandments: Love God, and love each other. That's relationship language, whether we realize it or not.

So it's very important that we talk about our relationships correctly – that we get those prepositions, those relation-words, correct. After all, consider the differences in these sentences:

God is *over* us.
God is *beside* us.
God is *under* us.
God is *behind* us.

Those all mean *very* different things. They each describe a different kind of relationship with God. And while we might make an argument for how they might be true in some way or other, the message of this Advent and Christmas season is found in another preposition entirely: *God is with us!* This is what God tells us over and over:

- "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me." (Psalm 23:4)
- *A prophecy of Jesus' birth:* "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel (which means God-With-Us)." (Isaiah 7:14, Matthew 1:23)
- *Jesus' "Great Commission" ends with this:* "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20)
- *Describing the new heavens and new earth:* "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God." (Revelation 21:3)

Folks, this is *amazing* news! God is *with* us! He does not lord it *over* us, nor does He lag *behind* us or run *ahead* of us – and He certainly is not a weakling God who is *beneath* us in some way. He is *with* us! This means, as we read above, that even if we go through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, we do not have to be afraid, for God, the Good Shepherd, is *with* us, there in the mist of the grief and pain. God is *with* us that He even became one of us, taking on flesh, daring to empty Himself of glory so that He could live out a full life, experiencing the full range of our human experiences. He even died a horrific death on a cross for us – that's how much He is *with* us! And now, as we live for Him, sent out by Him, we can trust that He is still *with* us through the power of His Holy Spirit. He never leaves us, never forsakes us, never abandons us – and when He comes again in the flesh, we will be *with* Him for all eternity. We will dwell directly in the presence of God for all eternity. Hallelujah!

That is, in a nutshell, the entire meaning of this holy season – it's contained in that little word: *with*. With the coming of Jesus Christ, God is now Emmanuel – God-With-Us – and He will never not be in that relationship with us. And all that that means – salvation, comfort, healing, strength, joy, peace, and so much more – will take us an eternity to explore and appreciate. But this month, we celebrate that it has come, and that it is forever true: God is *with* us! Hallelujah!

As you shop, as you bake cookies, as you wrap gifts, and as you go to parties, be sure to praise God over and over for being a God *with* us – and make sure that, in all that you say, think, and do, that you are *with* Him! Hallelujah! To Him alone be the glory!

In Christ's Love,

Joshua