

**“EMMANUEL...
For a New Year!”**

Isaiah 9:2,6; 7:14
Matthew 1:18-22; 28:20

January 2, 2011

Sermon preached by
Pastor Rob Fulton
First United Presbyterian Church
Bellefontaine, Ohio

It is now the second Sunday AFTER Christmas, and Christmas, for all intents and purposes is OVER. Oh, I know! Liturgically, the Christmas season is SUPPOSED to last 12 days AFTER Christmas...until Epiphany...January 6th. THAT'S when we're supposed to put up the lights and decorate our homes and sing all those Christmas carols and celebrate with gifts and parties. But, when you begin getting ready for Christmas in the middle of OCTOBER, it's no WONDER we tend to want it all over with by the second Sunday AFTER Christmas. After nearly two and a half months of this "Christmas" thing, it is, quite frankly, time to move on to other things. Which is, after all, exactly what happens in the Christmas story as well.

GONE are the shepherds out in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night. GONE are the Wise Men from the East who came to worship before the new-born king. GONE is the sweet baby Jesus on the sweet smelling hay of Bethlehem's manger because there was no room for him in the inn. After all, Christmas is OVER and the signs of its passing are all around us.

The candles on our Advent Wreath have all been lit, so there's nothing left to anticipate. The poinsettias, what's left of them, have all started to turn yellow and drop their leaves, making a mess all over everywhere. The Christmas gifts that were so carefully selected or made before the holidays have all been put to use...or put away on some closet shelf...or, if the truth were known, probably returned to the store in that mad scramble called the "after-Christmas exchange!" After all, the merchants are already to beginning to show their SPRING fashions, don't you know! And though the Christmas trees and other greenery are still before us here in the sanctuary, MOST of us have already begun the laborious task of taking down and putting away all those wonderful decorations we so joyously and carefully put up before Christmas. "Get that stuff OUT of here," I heard a woman say the other day of the Christmas decorations still hanging in a store. "Don't they know Christmas is OVER already?!"

Ah yes! We do so much better with the anticipation...with the getting READY for...with the looking FORWARD to...than we do with the event once it's actually here, and then over and done with!

And WHY NOT? It's a NEW YEAR after all and time to look to the future...time to put the past behind us and look AHEAD...time to let bygones be bygones and look forward with eager anticipation to what the days to come have in store. That's what New Year's is all about, isn't it? "Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead," as the Apostle Paul so appropriately put it.

And yet, before we get too far away from the "old" of Christmas and into the "new" of the New Year, there seems to be one last message from Christmas that we need to hear...need to remember...PRECISELY BECAUSE it applies so much to what we face as we look toward all that lies ahead. Because while looking ahead...looking forward...carries with it a lot of anticipation...a great deal of eagerness and much hopefulness for a bright new day...for a better future perhaps than the past has been...it ALSO carries with it an equal amount of nervousness, anxiety and worry as well...precisely because NONE of us know what the future holds. Oh, to be sure, the prognosticators and forecasters

and talking heads and political pundits...not to mention the psychics and soothsayers and astrologers and seers...will all try and TELL us what the future holds. But the truth of the matter is that THEY don't know what lies ahead any more than any of the rest of us know...much less whether it will actually BE that "*Happy New Year*" we so often wish each other at this time of the year.

Our hope...our PRAYER, of course, is that 2011 WILL prove to be a good year. For some of us, no doubt, things can only get better. After all the trials and tribulations, trouble and tragedy we faced in 2010, 2011 is BOUND to be an improvement...or so we hope...and pray! We hope and pray that our health remains good – or even gets better...that our loved ones will be happy and our children will be safe...that the economy will bounce back and continue to improve...that we'll finally find a job to support ourselves and our families...or that the one we have will remain secure in the midst of uncertain times. We hope and pray that the world will be at peace...that the current "hot spots" -- Afghanistan, Korea, Somalia, the Middle East – will know some measure of stability rather than boiling over into further escalation of military action. We pray no planes will crash...no hurricanes or tornados will strike...no floods will ravage the countryside...no earthquakes wreck havoc and destruction in the lives of innocent people.

We pray that God's Spirit might continue to rest upon and resident within our church family that our congregation will continue to grow and prosper...not only in numbers as new members join our family of faith...but in spirituality...in commitment...in love and care and concern not only for our Lord and Savior – that's always the first and foremost priority – but for one another and those around us as well.

And...AND...we hope that Ohio State will playing in the National Championship game next year...or a least the Rose Bowl where they rightly belong...instead of some minor, podunk game like the Sugar Bowl, for heaven's sake. Although with Tyrell Pryor and four other players suspended for the first five games for "improper activities," that hope seems HIGHLY unlikely...unless, of course, God suddenly decides to grants Jim Tressel the power to work miracles!

ALL of these things...and so many more...are part and parcel of our hopes and dreams...and most of all our PRAYERS as we stand here on the threshold of this new year.

And yet, none of us KNOW, do we? None of us can be SURE, can we? What DOES lie ahead for us in 2011? Will it actually BE a "*Happy New Year*" – one filled with joy and peace...hope and happiness? Or will it be a year of sorrow and sadness...tragedy and tears that we'd just as soon never have had to live through? Who KNOWS? We DON'T know! And BECAUSE we don't know...because we CAN'T be sure, facing the new year...facing what lies ahead...brings with it a certain amount of anxiety, as well as anticipation...concern, as well as eagerness...worry, as well as hopefulness. The future, in reality, is an open book...a blank page waiting to be filled...an unknown commodity yet to be discovered and determined.

And that is PRECISELY why the message of Christmas still needs to be heard and why it has such great importance as we look toward all the unknowns which the future holds. Because what the message of Christmas has to say to us TODAY is nothing less than the message which was loudly and clearly proclaimed nearly 2,000 years ago when Jesus was born. And that is EMMANUEL...God WITH us. God with us in the FUTURE, just as God has been with us in the PAST...just as God will be with us through ALL the unknowns that lie ahead in the days to come. Always and forever, GOD WITH US.

Through WHATEVER we face...through all the unknowns and uncertainties...through the joys and sorrows...triumphs and tragedies...ups and downs...highs and lows...successes and failures – God WITH us...ALWAYS – beside us...behind us...in front of us...beneath us...above us...within us – God will BE there – ALWAYS! That's the promise of EMMANUEL, Christ Jesus, our Lord, who came to earth as the incarnation...the very embodiment of God's love and care for us ALWAYS!

That's the message of Christmas we need to hear...not only as Christmas is packed up and put away for another year...but ESPECIALLY as we head into all the unknowns that the new year holds in store – that the One born of Mary and laid in a manger because there was no room for him in the inn, is ALSO the one in whose hands are held ALL the days of our lives...yesterday, today and tomorrow. HE is the one who was in the beginning with God...the one through whom all things were made...the one who is not only the author of life, but the KEEPER of life, as well...the one in whose care our lives are ALWAYS lived. He is Jesus, the Christ, the one who loved and LOVES us enough to become one WITH us – living WITH us and caring FOR us through each and every day that we face. There is nothing we HAVE faced

nor will EVER face when Emmanuel God has not and will not BE there...giving us strength...holding us up...offering us hope and courage and joy and peace to see us through WHATEVER may come our way.

Now, that is NOT to say that God will somehow magically take AWAY all the difficulties and hardships that the future might have in store for us, offering us only a life of sweet smelling roses and blue skies forever. Our faith never promises us that...any more than it promises that Jesus will stay a sweet, innocent babe in Bethlehem's manger. Instead, what our faith says to us is that no matter WHAT lies ahead...no matter WHAT we face in life...no matter WHAT the future has in store for us – God will BE there WITH us. For that is PRECISELY what God becoming flesh and dwelling among us, full of grace and truth, is all about – EMMANUEL, God WITH us, ALWAYS!

God is our refuge and strength, the Psalmist wrote,
a very present help in times of trouble.

Therefore, we don't EVER need to be afraid,
even if we world goes to hell in a handcart
and life comes tumbling down around us,

Emmanuel God is with us!

God becoming flesh is here! (Psalm 46)

That's exactly what the Apostle Paul was trying to convey to us with those great words of faith and hope from Romans which are tailor-made for all the unknown tomorrows that lie ahead:

Nothing we ever face, now or sometime in the future – neither
life nor death nor sickness nor tragedy nor unhappiness nor
sorrow nor disappointment nor failure – NOTHING we ever face
will EVER be able to separate us from the love of Him who is
EMMANUEL...God WITH us...ALWAYS! (Romans 8:38-39)

That is the promise of Christmas that goes far beyond the decorations being taken down and gifts being put away...that extends beyond the Christmas carols and good will of the season...that outlasts the flame of the Advent candles and the poinsettias that shed their leaves – the hope and promise of ALL the ages which is born into our midst to let us know that even as we head into all the anticipation and anxiety...eagerness and concern...the hopefulness and worry of the new year which lies before us, that God, through the Holy Child of Bethlehem, and the Savior he grew up to be, is with us ALWAYS...even to the end of time.

And so, good friends and beloved of the Lord, I invite you to go forth and face each new beginning...each new day of the year that lies before you...carrying in your mind and in your heart the promise of Emmanuel...God WITH you, ALWAYS! Carry the promise of Christmas with you daily, long after the Christmas season is over and done with and put on the shelf for another year! Go confidently into all that the coming year holds in store, knowing that even as you go forth to face the new year, Emmanuel, God WITH us God, is there – giving you the strength, the comfort, the hope and the joy you need for the living of this and EVERY day, both now and forever more!

Amen and AMEN!

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