

What's your favorite part about Christmas? Is it the Christmas story, the nativity scenes, the lights, the songs, the treats, the gifts, the cards, the traditions, or something else? It's hard to narrow it down to just a couple isolated elements. But I'm betting somewhere near the top of your list is spending time with the ones you love. God created us to be relational. We have an innate need to be in fellowship with God and to share our lives and experiences with others. We weren't designed to navigate this life in isolation.

And that's one of the most beautiful things about the Christmas story—at its core, it's all about God connecting **with** us to redeem us.

Matthew 1:23 reminds us about the prophecy in Isaiah: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means God with us)". In Hebrew "Immanu" means "*with us*" and "El" is "*God*". (Sidenote: you may notice *Immanuel* is sometimes spelled *Emmanuel*, which is the Greek translation in which the New Testament was written.) Consider how significant it was that God demonstrates His love for us by choosing to be **with** us. His plan of salvation wasn't carried out from a distance but rather through direct and personal interaction with us.

John 1:14 reiterates God's intentions saying, "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." Again, in some of his final words to his disciples, Jesus assured them, "And surely *I am with you always*, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:20b)

What a powerful assurance from a loving God—He will always be **with** us.

In times of celebration and jubilation, He is with us.  
In times of struggle and uncertainty, He is with us.  
In times of suffering and difficulty, He is with us.  
In times of sadness and disappointment, He is with us.  
In times of peace and contentment, He is with us.  
He is always with us!

This season of Christmas is a great time to reflect on the past year and be reminded how God has been **with** us, individually but also corporately as a body of Salem. Scroll back through some of the previous Salem communications and Elder Corners or finger through your own journals or prayer requests of 2023 and I guarantee you'll be amazed how God has shown up time and time again, working at, in and through Salem. If you're new to our church, ask a regular attender or any pastor or elder and we'll be thrilled to share what He's been up to. It was quite a year, and we turn the calendar to 2024 with good momentum, looking forward with great expectation and anticipation to what He'll do over this next year.

And as we prepare for another year of life and ministry together, I encourage you to think about your relationships. How's your relationship with God? He's with you. Do you need to work on the quality or quantity of your time with Him? How about your natural relationships with those He has placed in your path or circles of influence—those with whom you live, work, study, and play? Your family, neighbors, co-workers, colleagues, fellow students, hobby partners, etc. Live transparently. Look for opportunities to share about the God who loves us and is **with** us, His character and goodness, both through His gift of a Savior and His invitation for eternal life, and how He's actively involved in your life. And as you do, remember, "The LORD himself goes before you and *will be with you*; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged." (Deuteronomy 3:18) Indeed, **God is with us!**

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year, Salem!

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