Now, Matthew tells us, the birth of Jesus took place in this way:
There was a man named Joseph who was getting ready to break it off with his fiancé Mary and leave her because he found out she was pregnant with a child who wasn’t his.

*I want us all to sit with that for a minute.*

The story of Christmas begins with pain and anxiety, the disappointment of a broken relationship, and the looming possibility of separation, abandonment, and dismissal. In Matthew, the birth of Jesus begins as bad news for Mary and Joseph because it begins as the scandalous news of a child conceived out of wedlock.

We are so excited about the good news we know is coming at the end that we often skip over the most important part of the story. Don’t let the presence of the Holy Spirit or the intervention of the angel cause you to miss the plotline here. Right from the very beginning, this whole thing was up in the air because the people that God needed to make it happen were getting ready to walk away from each other.

We are told that Joseph was a righteous man who followed the commandments of God as they are found in the Torah, and the law was clear on this matter. In Deut. 22 it states a woman in Mary’s predicament should be cast aside, for righteousness sake, and perhaps even put to death. Joseph’s righteousness left him in a profound ethical crisis. He wanted to keep the law, but he also wanted to protect his fiancé Mary at the same time. So, he resolved that the only way to do that was to dismiss her quietly, that way he could abide by the commandments and, at the same time, prevent Mary from facing public disgrace. Joseph had come up with a novel solution to his legal conundrum, and what we sometimes miss when we read this story is that in those days the “right” thing to do in this particular situation was to break ties and walk away. Yet, even though Joseph was doing everything right in the eyes of the law, there was a new kind of morality and ethics on the horizon and a brand new form of righteousness that God was bringing into the world.

One night, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and challenged all of his righteous predispositions by saying, “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” When he woke from the dream, Joseph decided, in spite of his fears, to go against his own instincts, to move beyond his own limited understanding of what was right and good, and to stay with Mary even though she was pregnant with a child that wasn’t his. Joseph decided to take the child that Mary was carrying, to give it a name, and to call it his own.

And so, the story of the birth of Jesus—the story of Christmas begins with a profound change of heart. It begins with Joseph turning away from his plans to separate from Mary and instead making a choice to be with her and with her holy child. Joseph’s decision to stay with Mary recalls those beautiful words that Ruth spoke to Naomi, “Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from
following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge, your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”

The Anglican theologian Sam Wells says, “the most important word in the Bible is the word ‘with,’ and yet we prefer the word ‘for.’” He claims,

When we care about people at Christmas, we want to do something ‘for’ them. If our relationship with someone is faltering, want to do something ‘for’ them to make them feel better. We praise those who spend their lives doing things ‘for’ others. This time of year we cook ‘for,’ we buy presents ‘for,’ we offer charity ‘for,’ and these are good, warm-hearted gestures. But somehow they do not go to the heart of the problem. We give someone a gift and yet a divide still exists between us. We wear ourselves out showing hospitality and yet we never have an honest conversation. We make fine gestures of charity and yet the poor are still strangers to us. ‘For’ is a fine word, but it does not dismantle resentment, overcome misunderstanding, or deal with alienation, loneliness, or isolation. What often makes our attempts at charity seem hollow is not that they are not genuine, helpful or kind, but that what isolated, grieving, impoverished people usually need is not more gifts but the faithful presence of someone who really cares about them as a person.

Wells goes on to say, “In a lot of ways, being ‘with’ someone is harder than being ‘for’ someone. We can be ‘for’ without a conversation, without a real relationship, without a genuine shaping of our lives to welcome and incorporate the other. But we all fear the ‘with’ because it seems to ask more of us than we can give.”

And yet, the reality is there are times when there is truly nothing that we can do ‘for’ anyone. It is a helpless feeling to know that we can’t fix someone we love or do anything ‘for’ them that will make them better and yet there are many situations that we face in life where that is exactly the case. I remember a few years ago when I was in the midst of one of the most difficult times in my life, going through a divorce; there was nothing that anyone could do ‘for’ me. I needed time to process through grief and loss, and that was work I had to do for myself. But like Job, I had family and friends who were willing to simply be with me in the midst of my suffering and to sit with me in the dust and the ashes of my grief and pain. At the time, I thought they were just being kind to me but now I realize now my family and friends were the presence of God sitting with me in the darkness.

The story of Joseph’s decision to stay with Mary and the child is an example of radical solidarity—of making the hard decision to be ‘with’ someone. It is what true faith and love look like in the world when they are no longer an abstract concept but embodied in real life. And yet Joseph’s act of solidarity, fidelity, and love is only a microcosm of the larger and grander narrative of God’s decision to come and be with us. ‘With’ is the most important word in the Bible because ‘with’ is the most fundamental thing about God. ‘With’ is the way that God relates to God’s self, and ‘with’ is the way that God relates to us as human beings and to all of humanity. When the angel spoke to Joseph in his dream it quoted from the prophet Isaiah and proclaimed, “Behold, she shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him ‘Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us.’” The most miraculous part of the Christmas story is not that Mary conceived a child by the Holy Spirit miraculously, or that an angel spoke to Joseph in a dream miraculously, or even that he decided to stay with Mary; the most miraculous thing in the story is that God refuses to abandon us.

What we celebrate at Christmas is this startling promise of divine solidarity. “Emmanuel” means God is with us in solidarity, fidelity, and love. It is the annunciation of God’s intimate and enduring presence in our lives and in our world. Over and over again in the Bible, God makes the same promise to God’s people: “I will be with you and I will never leave you nor forsake you.” God’s presence is a resounding refrain throughout the scriptures, and yet it is not hard to understand how
I recently rediscovered the meaning of Emmanuel in a song by a Compton rapper, Kendrick Lamar. Yes, the Spirit often speaks in unlikely places. He wrote a song entitled “Alright” that was inspired by a trip he made to South Africa, where Lamar witnessed the struggle of people whose lives were ten times harder than his own. The track opens with a line from The Color Purple, “Alls my life, I had to fight,” but then it goes on to say, “Hard times like God. Bad trips like: ‘God!’ Nazareth, I’m messed up, homie you’re messed up. But if God got us then we’re gon’ be alright. Do you hear me? Do you feel me? We’re gon’ be alright.” The song has become incredibly popular. It won a Grammy award in February, and has been sung in protests all over the country. But the chorus has been stuck in my head all year long. “If God’s got us then we’re going to be alright.” It’s such a simple statement yet, when injustice and oppression are constantly bearing down on you, to sing these words is a profound expression of trust, faith, and hope.

Kendrick Lamar’s song captures exactly what Emmanuel and Christmas is all about. God is with us and that means no matter what happens we are going to be all right. In the 8th chapter of his famous letter to the church in Rome, Paul said the very same thing. “For I am convinced that neither life, nor death, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ.” These words fill our lungs with hope and our hearts with courage. They give us fortitude and bravery, which ironically is exactly what the angel offered to Joseph to turn his life around. The angel said, “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife...to stay with her...to be with her.” Here in the angel’s words, we discover that, if we want to be a part of what God is doing in the world at Christmas, the first step is overcome our fears—to cling to words like the ones Lamar or the Psalmist sang, “If God is with us, then who shall we fear?”

Like the Israelites, we live in a time of great social transition. It seems as though there is never ending conflict and chaos in a world that is constantly changing by the minute. Anxiety, grief, distress, unrest, and pain bear down and threaten to overwhelm us. Oppression and injustice rear their ugly head. Differences seem to divide us and forces threaten to separate us further and further from one another. The great temptation is for us—in this world in this time— is to simply walk away from God and to walk away from each another. But, the good news of Christmas is that we are not alone and that we can live through all the challenges of life because of Emmanuel. If we can hold on to the promise that God is always with us with faith and hope, then we are going to be all right. We don’t have to walk away or be divided from one another because, if God is with us, then we can live with courage, we can overcome our fears, and we can walk through the darkness and the loneliness of our world hand in hand together as God’s people.

So, how do we celebrate this startling promise of divine solidarity that is “Emmanuel”, and the incredible news that God is with us? We celebrate by making a decision like Joseph, to stick together, to stay with each other, to live in solidarity “with” people in need, to show up and be present with those in pain, in poverty, and distress when there is nothing we can do “for” them. We celebrate by being “with” our families and “with” each other as a church community in good times and bad, without trying to fix or change one another. We celebrate by being with those who are hurting, by sitting with them in their grief and sadness, even when there is nothing we can do or say to take their pain away. We celebrate by listening and walking even with the people we find most
difficult. And we celebrate by being “with” God in prayer and worship rather than rushing around in our anxiety trying to find more things to do for God. God descended into our messy world to be with us, to stand with all who suffer, to show us a life of fidelity and love, and in the greatest act of solidarity, entered into our darkest brokenness and pain by dying on a cross with the abandoned of our world. But then he came back and said, “Lo, I will be with you always even unto the end of the age.”

Our calling as Christians at Christmas is to learn what it means to be with others in the way that God has come to be with us in Christ, who is Emmanuel, and to learn how to mirror our lives after the one who lived a life of solidarity, fidelity, and love. We are fearful people, and it will take great courage for us to learn to live in this way, but just like the angel said to Joseph, God says to us, “Do not be afraid,” and, like Isaiah God, says, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and the rivers shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire, you shall not be burned, the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.” Emmanuel means that we can stay with each other through the waters and fires of this life because God will never leave us or forsake us, God will not abandon us, and God will not allow us to face our perils alone. Emmanuel means that God is always with us, and if God is with us then we’re going to be alright. Amen.