

A Life Defined  
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We have several ways of describing Mary's situation leading up to that first Christmas night,

The most universal term used is that she was

Pregnant.

But others include:

Expecting

Gestating

Carrying a child

Anticipating, reproducing, fruitful, breeding, creating offspring, propagating, proliferating...

And then you have the more colloquial sayings of our day: she had a Bun-in-the-oven, was preggers, teeming with offspring, OR she was in the family way.

But the description which captures my imagination most fully is the way the KJV describes it -

Mary - was - with child...

"With Child" is more compelling because it teaches me what this season - at its best celebrates -

That God - is WITH US.

Think about how inextricably bound together a pregnant woman is with her child.

They are always TOGETHER!

Aware of this because we have gone through 3 times in our household

And now it seems – every time you turn around another

Calvary staff family member is having a baby.

In the past 30 months we've welcomed three babies –

starting with our Sophie

then Director F&Y Ramon/Cessilye (Emmanuel)

months later Jon and Jamie A. Director Christian Ed. (Nate)

and now – Vicar Pernini –any day now

any hour now!!! Kathryn, like Mary

WITH CHILD

[Does this say something about Calvary?

Pastor Bill, would you like draw any conclusions here? Perhaps...

Stay away from the water fountains?]

They are together - 24/7 for 30-40 weeks.

There is not a time - from the first moments of morning sickness

Through the final throes of labor pains that she is not aware

Of the child's presence.

The mother is fully aware that the child is WITH HER.

As they say - A woman can not be "a little pregnant"

She can't say to her partner

Hey, I'm feeling really exhausted and grouchy today

Do you think you could take a turn being pregnant while

I go visit with a friend at Starbucks?

There is no 'time off' from the work of the womb

There is no pushing the pause button on the gestation period...

Or I think of all that movement in the mama's belly,  
the elbowing and the kicking of the baby in the womb,  
so delightful for the dad, initially for mom too!

But although the dad never tires of this

I always thought it was "Cool!" -

When mom is jarred awake by an elbow in the womb for the third time  
between 3 and 3:30 AM - I can imagine her saying - I am so OVER THIS...

Mom - a constant reminder that the baby is with her...

THE WOMAN IS WITH CHILD

And the CHILD is WITH THE MOTHER

This gives us a great insight into the meaning of Christmas

This is how I believe Jesus' birth affects us in same way -

We now know that GOD IS WITH US!!!

24/7 - week in and week out

Inextricably bound together with us because the Word became flesh.

inseparable -

not taking a break from us

Not leaving us

Not abandoning us or making us orphans

The birth story in Matthew applies the prophet Isaiah's term -  
IMMANUEL to Jesus.

Literally means - God with us.

Tonight - I contend that IMMANUEL - is what defines our life...

That is why we celebrate --- some with elegance,  
Others with extravagance,  
But hopefully all with a sense of exuberance  
– BECAUSE: God... is WITH us!!!

Immanuel defines our life...

This means that your life is not defined by your accomplishments  
Your IQ, GPA, salary or portfolio returns (or in these times - lack of  
portfolio returns!)  
No, your life is defined by Immanuel.

for Jesus did not arrive in a PALACE

Mary & Joseph did not ride in a motorcade  
they rode a donkey  
to a simple and lowly stable  
Jesus was born among the poor and humble

THEREFORE we too can empty ourselves  
empty ourselves of pride,  
of false visions of grandeur,  
we can stop trying to prove ourselves;

for our lives are not defined by our accomplishments, but by  
God with us - Immanuel

This also means  
Your life is not defined by your by your failures - your missteps or your regrets

Anders learned that recently.

Anders Adams is a sophomore at Burlington County Community College in NJ. I had never met him until Thursday a week ago. Anders started the day leaving NJ heading to WCU to watch a live performance of the Nutcracker. He needed to complete a report on it for his theatre class. Things were going well for him, until he was about 2 miles away from his destination, at the intersection where Route 3 and Paoli pike split - it was there his car ran out of gas and he was stranded. With no cash, and no available limit left on his credit card; and with all his friends and family back in NJ, Anders seemed stuck. But, he did what all resourceful young men might do in such a situation - he called his Youth Director! Yes, he called Karla at St. Paul's Lutheran church in Hainsport, NJ and asked if she could help. She said, "I think there is a Lutheran church right across the street from WCU - perhaps they can help?!!" And so, I got a call, right before lunch, asking if I could provide some gas for a stranded college student who needed to finish his semester assignment - it was a first of its kind of requests!!! I left the office, went to the shed in our back yard, got our red gas can and met Anders right where route 3 and Paoli pike split. I put 2 gallons of gas in his car, asked him to follow me to Wawa, where I put more gas in his car and then wished him well. Anders was so elated and surprised to receive this help, I could tell he wanted to give me a great big bear hug, but since we had just met, he opted for the extended handshake as a "thank you." He said, "Pastor, I sure would like to worship at your church some time." So I gave him my card which lists our service times and then I said, "Anders, you are always welcome at Calvary. But do me a favor, next time you go from Burlington County to WC - fill up your gas tank before you leave!!!"

Your life is not defined by your shortcomings.

But rather by - Immanuel - God with us - Who promises to 'cast out our sin, and enter in...'

Finally, this means

Your life is not defined by your hurts, pain, your limits...

These past weeks, the pastors, vicar, and parish nurse have been conducting homebound visits – taking poinsettias, homemade Christmas cards by children in our Wednesday night program, but

most importantly communion to our  
homebound members and friends.

Tuesday I met with Nancy Ann, whose life is limited physically by Lupus & MS. She may be limited in that dimension, but not emotionally/spiritually

She said the day before I came, she felt bad  
– knowing I was coming but she  
had nothing prepared (muffins/brownies)

Then a neighbor dropped by to deliver a plate of cookies  
She had made with her grandchildren

Nancy Ann said,

“I started to cry at door – holding plate cookies

'This is an answer to prayer,' she told her friend, 'now I have something  
for our pastor's visit tomorrow'...”

Your life is not defined by your hurts, pain, your limits...

IT IS Defined by God's wholeness, God's strength, God's love...

Perhaps the bottom line is, you need to fill in the blank.

I invite you as you wake up each morning of this coming new year –  
to repeat this simple phrase

God is with \_\_\_\_\_.fill in the blank with your name!

God is with Dan.

God is with Carmine.

God is with Kathy.

God is with Anders

God is with Nancy Ann

God is with

fill in the blank

you have Jesus to thank

for knowing a God who is WITH US.

And now to Him who is able to accomplish abundantly beyond all we can ask or imagine, to Him be glory, now and forever. Amen.