

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH  
December 2, 2012  
Thrill of Hope: O Come O Come Emmanuel  
*Mark Batterson*

Welcome to everybody at all six of our locations. We are thrilled that you are part of NCC this weekend. Before we dive in, can I encourage you to extend an invitation to a friend? I think this is a season where people are more likely than ever, more open than ever to come to church. So if you have a friend who doesn't have a church, I encourage them to invite them to come with you and be part of what God is doing here at National Community Church.

Just for the record, next weekend, our Pastor of Discipleship, Heather Zempel, will be speaking. Then December 15/16, I'll be back and have a little gift for you, a little Christmas weekend. Then all of our campus pastors will be teaching live the weekend before Christmas.

Turn over to Matthew Chapter 1 and we'll get there in just a moment. I love Christmas for lots of different reasons. It starts when I go up in our attic because that's where all of our stuff is. I pull out the ladder and pull out the Christmas tree. We put up the tree. I love the glow of the Christmas tree early in the morning and late at night. I love peppermint mochas, eggnog, lattes and I love listening to Christmas music. I love all of the trappings and traditions but let's not forget the reason for the season! We are celebrating the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ and what that means. I love the title of this series. It is pulled from one of the songs that we'll sing together, Thrill of Hope. I think that word 'hope' captures it. The truth is, you could probably say joy or love or peace captures it too, but this idea of hope is so central to what Christmas is all about. I think what we are going to do is what Acts 2:26 says we should do, we are going to pitch our tents in the land of hope. I love that little verse. That is the Message translation. How many of you know you can pitch your tent in lots of different places? You can pitch it in the land of fear. You can pitch it in the land of guilt, in the land of anxiety, you can pitch it in the land of negativity if you can find a place, it's pretty full! You can pitch your tent in the land of bitterness or you can pitch your tent in the land of hope. I think over the next four weeks, we are going to pitch our tent in the land of hope and believe that God is going to meet us in a special way.

I always pray that during the Christmas season, God would give me a fresh revelation of who He is and I believe He is going to do that for each one of us.

Matthew 1:18

*<sup>18</sup> This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.*

*<sup>20</sup> But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is*

*conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”*

<sup>22</sup> *All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).*

God with us.

This week, I was waiting in line to make a deposit at our bank and the lady in front of me was taking forever. In fact, she turned around at one point and apologized to me. When she left, one of the tellers said, ‘Hey, do you know who that was?’ I said, ‘No.’ She said, ‘That was the former Secretary of Labor.’ I looked it up and sure enough, that was her. I don’t know, it was like wow, I just bumped into an important person. There is something about that, whether it is an athlete or a politician or someone that has a TV personality. There is something about bumping into someone like that that is cool, right? I am not an autograph seeker or a photo bomber. I’m not that kind of person unless it is Adrian Peterson! My first brush with someone famous, I was 17 years at a golf course in Chicago. I was in the bathroom and I walked Doug Collins, who was the coach at that time, and he parked at the urinal right next to me. We did not shake hands but it was cool. I’m a huge Bulls fan and I was like O my goodness! I just peed next to Doug Collins! Can I say that? It was a highlight of my life at that point!

Over the years, I’ve bumped into different people here and there. I remember when I was in seminary in the Chicago area, I bumped into Steve Kerr, who was the shooting guard on the Bulls during some of their championship runs and the funny thing was, he was wearing a Bulls sweatshirt. What was so funny about that was the fact that Jordan and Pippen and everybody would be incognito. But Steve Kerr was the less-than-tall white guy on the team so here he was wearing the sweatshirt and we were pushing our grocery cart and I was like that’s Steve Kerr!

When we held services at Union Station, I bumped into people all the time. I remember one Sunday, Anthony Hopkins was shooting a film while we were having service downstairs in the movie theater. One time, Chris Collinsworth was walking through and we took a picture together. John Riggins, the former Redskin, I’m starting to sound like a stalker! I promise you I’m not but Pastor Joel might be! We were in Ethiopia and into our hotel walks actress Natalie Portman. It was weird bumping into someone like that half way around the world. What I loved is that Pastor Joel went up to her and said Hi. In fact, I’ll tell you exactly what he said, ‘My nephew loved you as Queen Amidala.’ It was a lame moment! I can tell you about a number of folks I’ve bumped into but there is something about being in the presence of someone that has a little bit of fame or a little bit of power or a little bit of recognizability. They almost seem like they are more than human or super human. But here’s the deal, take all those instances where you bump into someone or you are in the presence of ‘human greatness’ so to speak, and then you juxtapose that with being in the presence of Almighty God! Shouldn’t we get a little bit excited? When we get into the presence of God, shouldn’t there be like a Wow! I just bumped into the presence of God! That’s what Christmas celebrates. The fact that the God of the universe, the Creator, the Sovereign One became one of us. He moved into the neighborhood. The incarnation. I think what I love about Jesus so much is that when you read the gospels, He is

the epitome of holiness but wasn't holier than thou. In fact, He was so down to earth that you couldn't keep people away, not prostitutes, not lepers, not little children; Pharisees, yes, but everybody else! He was so touchable, so reachable, and it is at Christmas, at Bethlehem that God Most High became God Most Nigh.

I want to talk about this for a few moments. Isaiah 55:8 is kind of my theological ground zero. It says:

*As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts, declares the Lord.*

The prophet describes the difference between our thoughts and his thoughts as the distance of the universe. Let me try to put this into perspective. I haven't done this in a long time so let me give it a shot.

Light travels at 186,000 miles per second. That is so fast, everybody snap your fingers. In the time it took to do that, light circumnavigated the globe half a dozen times. Our sun is 93 million miles away. So let's just say we could drive there, at 65 miles an hour, 24 hours a day, 365 days of years, anybody want to guess how long it would take you to get there? It would take 163 years! That's a long way! The incredible thing is that our sunlight is only 8 minutes old because it is traveling so fast. Here's the thing, that's our closest star in our tiny little galaxy called the Milky Way. Astrophysics discovered galaxies that are 15.5 billion light years away. That distance is virtually incomprehensible. I'm not even going to try to put that in mathematical terms because it is impossible but it is this distance that is unimaginable and God says that is about the distance between your thoughts and my thoughts. So here's my thought, your best thought on your best day is 15.5 billion light years short of how great and how good God really is.

The prophet Jeremiah said no one can fathom his greatness.

Ephesians 3 says *He is able to immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine according to his power that is at work within us.*

He is God Most High but He is also God Most Nigh.

Let me go all the way back to the book of Genesis and we'll find out way back to Bethlehem in a bit. In Genesis 1, it says that the Spirit of God was hovering over the chaos. The Hebrew word is one of my favorites that is a two-dimensional word. In regard to time, it refers to the split second right before and the split second right after something happens. It is almost like this idea that it forms a parentheses in time around every single moment. It is a fascinating concept. Thomas Merton captures it this way: The Lord travels in all directions at once and the Lord arrives in all directions at once. Wherever we are, we find that He just departed and wherever we go, we find that He just arrived before us.

It is this idea that He is the Alpha and the Omega. God exists outside of our space time dimensions and that it this idea of hovering. God hovers. But there is a second dimension, not

just time but in regards to space, this word refers to the place right in front and right in back. I love that! It is like a parentheses in space. What I'm trying to say is that God has you surrounded! He is all around us all the time.

And David paints a picture of this in Psalm 129. He says in verse 5: *You hem me in behind and before.* This idea of hemming in is such a beautiful concept. It says *You have laid your hand upon me, such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain. Then it says where can I go from your Spirit. Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there. If I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me.*

A.W. Tozer said:

God is above but He is not pushed up; He is beneath but He is not pressed down. He is outside but He is not excluded. He is inside but He is not confined. God is above all things presiding beneath all things, sustaining outside all things embracing and inside all things filling. He said that is the imminence of God.

God with us. God Most Nigh.

John 1:14 says that the Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood. In other words, God put skin on. Hebrews 4:15 says *We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses but we have one who was tempted in every way just as we are yet was without sin.* That is amazing! So relatable, so touchable, so accessible and we take it for granted. But for thousands of years, it did not work this way. For thousands of years, there was only one person, the high priest, who could gain access to the inner presence of God, the holy of holies and he could only do it once a year. But we have immediate access anytime anyplace.

The High Priest invites us into his throne room. *Approach the throne of grace with confidence so that we might receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

Here's what I want you to hear this weekend, we are singing this song O Come O Come Emmanuel, but really it is about this, O Come O Come Mark. God is singing that to me and He is singing that to you. He says *Behold I stand at the door and knock, if anyone says come in, I will sup with him and he with Me.* It is this idea that at Bethlehem, God became one of us and then invited us to the table, invited us into relationship. He is God with us. He is God for us.

I like this idea of God with us and God for us.

One of my favorite Christmas stories, a little boy named Benjamin who wanted a baby sister for Christmas and he decided to write God a letter. He sat down and wrote: Dear God, I've been a very good boy. Then he stopped writing because he knew it wasn't true and God wouldn't believe it. So he started over: Dear God, I've been a pretty good boy. Then he stopped again because he didn't feel like it was very convincing. He threw it away. Then he came up with a little plan. He went into the bathroom and grabbed a towel and walked over to the family nativity

scene and grabbed the figurine of Mary and wrapped her in a towel and hid her under his bed then he sat down and rewrote his letter: Dear Jesus, if you ever want to see your mother again!

Some of you didn't feel like you should laugh at that! But it's funny, we do what Benjamin did. We employ the same tactics in our attempts to get what we want from God. We use bribery and blackmail, don't we? We say, Dear God, if you do this, I'll do that. That's bribery! And then blackmail, God if you don't do this, I won't do that. Listen, that is never going to work and you don't even need to do it because God is for you. And if we would ever understand the heart of our heavenly Father, we would understand that no good will God withhold from those who walk uprightly before Him.

Matthew 7:11 says it this way, *If you then though you are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him.*

God with us. God for us. And finally, He is God in us.

In John, 16:7, Jesus says something that is kind of confusing. He says, *I tell you the truth, it is for your good that I'm going away, unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you, but if I go, I will send Him to you.*

Well, I thought Jesus said 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' I thought Jesus said, 'I am with you always even unto the end of the age.' So why would He say it's good for me to go away? It is simple, because God became man. When He moved into the neighborhood and took on flesh, He could only be in one place at one time. He took upon Himself human limitations. So why does He say He has to go away? It is part of God's master plan. This is the changing of the guard and it happens at Pentecost. When Jesus ascends and those early believers gather in the upper room in Jerusalem and then they get a serious visitation from the Holy Spirit, in that moment, the Spirit of God moves in and takes up residence within us as the followers of Christ.

This is a crazy thing to understand. I remember trying to explain it to the kids when they were smaller. One night I was singing a chorus to Parker, Spirit move in your temple. It's almost an invitation to the Holy Spirit to come and fill us and I asked Parker if he knew what the temple was and he said, 'The church?' And I said, 'No, actually the Bible says that we are the temple of the Holy Spirit, I Corinthians 6.' When we put our faith in Jesus, his Holy Spirit moves in and lives inside of us. I'll never forget what Parker said. He said, 'Cool! So my skin is like fake marble.' That's a deep thought. I think he was six or seven years old. I think that's awesome. We are walking temples. God with us and God for us and God in us. In Him we live and move and have our being.

I think we take a lot for granted. With some of the personal challenges I've been through, medically, physically over the years, and probably in light of the fact that I have asthma, I am more keenly appreciative of every breath I take. But just stop and think about this for a moment. When was the last time you considered the journey of an oxygen atom? It begins when air passes through your nose or mouth and unwanted dust is filtered out. The average person moves about 440 cubic feet of air per day, some of you hot air! Just making sure you are with me. It travels through the trachea into the lungs. Did you know the surface area of your lungs is 40

times greater than the surface area of your body? Oxygen atoms travel through the entire body via blood vessels. If those blood vessels were laid end to end, they would be approximately 100,000 miles long. That's long enough to circle the equator four times, in your body, blood vessels. At the end of that journey, oxygen enters individual cells and bonds with the food we eat and releases energy. Biologists call it cellular respiration. I call it a miracle! And it happens approximately 23,000 times a day! I think we owe God 23,000 thank yous. We experience 23,000 miracles.

Acts 17 says God gives all men life and breath. Job 34 says If God were to withdraw his breath, we would return to dust.

God with us, God for us, God in us.

Let me close with this. As we step into this Christmas season, I think it is a time for us to, in a sense, count our blessings, in the business of shopping or parties or travel and everything else that happens, we need to make sure that we remember what this thing is all about and that our hearts are filled with gratitude for Emmanuel, God with us.

This week, I drove down to Regent University to defend a dissertation. I had been ABD for more than a decade. I never thought I would finish it. Honestly, the family started growing, the church started growing and it just wasn't a priority and then I started writing books and they pay me to write books! So the dissertation just became this thing that I never thought I would do. But one thing led to another and on Wednesday of this week, I passed! I'm done! When I drove onto the campus, there were some interesting memories. I would go down there for a week at a time ten years ago, but it is one of those places that trigger a memory for me. In 1998, I was sitting in one of those doctoral classes and I got called out by an administrator who came and found me and said that my wife needed to talk to me. I was concerned because that was very strange. She informed me that she had just gotten a call that her dad had passed away. It was absolute shock. We drove from Virginia Beach back to D.C. and got on an airplane and the next thing we knew, we were meeting the family at a funeral home. It was just a blur. I still don't get it, prime of life, prime of ministry and had just been to the doctor and the doctor said you could drive a mac truck through his arteries and then he died of a heart attack. So when I drove onto the campus, a profound sense of sadness came over me. You know, you shut it out and you go on with life but, man, I miss him. I miss his presence. A lot of us have lost love ones and there's probably a wide variety of why you might miss them. My father-in-law was fun to be around. It was a party when he was around. He was so loving and giving. I remember at Christmas, the deal was, almost always there would be tickets to the Chicago Bulls under our Christmas plates. So it wasn't really a surprise but we acted surprised. It was a fun tradition. What I miss most is just his presence. I think now about my family and the ones I love the most. I love being with my family. I love driving the kids all over the place. Summer is swimming and she had practices at 6:00 a.m. on the absolute other side of the city, so we have some early mornings together, and we don't talk a lot because she sleeps! But even in those moments, it is hard to explain but I enjoy her presence because I love her! It is the same way for all my children. I think one of the greatest gifts we can give another person is our presence. What I mean by that is not just being there absent-mindedly or just barely listening or not really engaged. I'm talking about being fully present and fully engaged and fully interested and fully available. The gift of your presence to

another person is something that is precious. If I had to describe my dad in a phrase, he was there for me. It was his presence that I appreciate. That's the gift we celebrate. It doesn't really matter what's under the tree, right? What we really celebrate is the fact that our heavenly Father gave us the greatest gift imaginable, his own Son.

*For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*

In other words, that is God's way of saying, 'I don't want to just be with you, I want to be with you forever!' I can't imagine eternity without you.

Let's pray.

Father help us this weekend to personalize and to internalize Emmanuel, God with us. Lord as we sing the words O Come O come Emmanuel, I pray that we would hear You singing over us, singing words to us, O Come O Come Mark. You invite us to come into your presence and we thank You for that precious gift. Lord I pray that no one would walk out this weekend without receiving the gift that You have freely offered. It can't just be about what happened 2,000 years ago. We have to personally and decisively come to a point in our life where we decide to follow You and we decide to receive You and where we decide to put our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Lord I pray that many right now in this moment would experience God with them for the very first time. We invite You to come and fill our hearts with your love and fill our temples with your Spirit. O Come O Come Emmanuel. In Jesus' name, Amen.

*Ministry Transcription*

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