

Christmas time is here! For many, this is favorite time of year. This is a time of joy and celebrations. It is a time of lights and cheer. Everywhere we turn we hear songs about how this is the “hap-happiest time of the year.”

But, despite all of the exhortations to joy and happiness, this is also the most sad and depressing time of year. Today is the shortest day of the year, and while it is not nearly as bad here as it was up in Canada, Seasonal Affective Disorder is real. The short, often gray days, and long nights are, literally, depressing.

Cheering this up, however, is Christmas. This is a time for family and friends. It’s a time to remember and make new memories. Christmas is a time to be with others.

However, it is this very aspect of Christmas that can also make things difficult. While Christmas is a time for togetherness, sometimes we feel more alone at this time of year or we are more aware of how lonely we are the rest of the year.

This is a time when the grief of loved ones lost, hits home especially hard. This is a time when the pain of a broken family slaps you in the face. This is a time when so many of our problems become more acute.

When family gathers, the holes left by those who have moved away and are unable to be here become glaringly obvious. We remember those in the military who are far from home. We thank God for phones and video chats, but we also know all too well that those are not the same as having them with us.

When everyone celebrates family, everything feels lonelier if we don’t have much family. We mourn the children or grandchildren that we never had and maybe never will. This is a time when that loneliness becomes acute.

We might even relish this time with others but have trouble really enjoying it because deep-down we are dreading when it will end. We know that soon the holidays will be over, visiting family will go home, and we might be alone again.

One of the curious things is that loneliness is a universal problem. There are times in all of our lives when we just feel alone, like no-one really understands. When problems happen, we feel isolated.

Often, we are afraid to share our problems with others. We don't think they will really understand what is going on. We don't want to burden them. We can end up feeling left-out, alone, wondering if anyone really cares. These feelings often continue, long after Christmas is over.

Rather than getting caught up in what our culture says Christmas is all about: family, friends, parties, and presents, we need to understand what Christmas is really about. The story of Christmas is the story of loneliness being transformed into belonging.

It all starts with the angel, Gabriel, telling Mary she is about to become pregnant with Jesus. This is wonderful news, but it is also isolating. How do you share this news with others? Would anyone believe Mary? Would her parents and friends believe that she and Joseph didn't engage in premarital sex? Won't they assume that she is making all of this angel stuff up?

How about fiancé, Joseph? He is the one person who knew for a fact that the child was not his. What would she tell him? Imagine, how do break this sort of news to him? “Sweetheart, I want you to know that I love you and have always been faithful to you. I just happen to be pregnant, but don't worry it's from the Holy Spirit.”

What we often miss here is the lonely situation that Mary was in. She was doing the right thing, submitting to God's will to carry the Christ child. Yet in doing so, she was also facing ostracization from virtually everyone.

Predictably, Joseph, didn't buy the whole “God made me pregnant” thing. He comes to the only logical conclusion: his fiancée cheated on him. This had to be devastating for him. His expectations of a life-long companion were dashed.

Now, he looks to break it off. Matthew tells us, “her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.”

In those days, a betrothal was more binding than today, so to end an engagement required a form of divorce. But, Joseph, being both just and caring, namely he wanted to do the right thing, but didn’t want Mary to be stoned for adultery, decided to divorce her quietly and wash his hands of the whole deal.

Then an angel comes to Joseph and sets him straight: “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” Through this extraordinary means, God puts Mary and Joseph’s relationship back together. God restores love and trust where mistrust had arisen.

But this creates a new problem. How is Joseph to explain this to others? Joseph is now put in a tough spot. His fiancée is pregnant, but it is not his child, but everyone around will assume that he and Mary lost all self-control. So, like Mary for Joseph to do the right thing means that his reputation will be wrongly tarnished. It means a certain amount of isolation from those around him.

If that wasn’t bad enough, then Joseph and Mary had to leave their home in Nazareth, because of taxes from the hated Roman Empire! So, now they are upended, separated from family and friends, having to relocate to Joseph’s ancestral home. While this removes them from the rumors, for a little while, they also lose their support network.

They get to Bethlehem only to find there is no room! After all, lots of others have had to go there because of the taxes. There are people everywhere, but no one will take them in. Mary and Joseph are alone in a crowd.

Tradition says that when they were looking for a place to stay, even though Mary was clearly pregnant, several places turned them down flat. Finally, one person offers all that he has – a stable. Mary is to give birth in a stinking – less than sterile stable.

Mary and Joseph were not the only ones in the story that were on the outside at that time. Consider, when Jesus is born, to whom do the angels then appear? They go to the shepherds – lonely workers out in the fields. Remember, back when Samuel went to Jesse, in Bethlehem, and told him to bring all of his sons, Jesse seemed to have forgotten David – the shepherd. Shepherds were on the fringe of society, often children or men who couldn’t hold other jobs. People distrusted them so much that their testimony wasn’t honored in courts!

Into this lonely situation, into this lonely world came God. He came to fulfill the prophecy from Isaiah: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel’ (which means, God with us).” God came here to be with us!

As He lived on this earth, Jesus learned what our loneliness is like. Some discounted Him, because of the rumors that He was an illegitimate child. (Yes, those rumors persisted throughout His life.) He didn’t have a home. All of His disciples abandoned Him at His hour of greatest need. On the cross, the Father even turned His face from Jesus. He died, virtually alone, being mocked by those around Him.

He did all of this so that we do not have to be alone. He came to be Immanuel – God with us. God endured loneliness and shame so that He can be with us!

Jesus came so that we can be with God. He suffered and died on the cross to break down the barrier between us and God. With Jesus’ resurrection, He has opened to us belonging in heaven. Through Him, we have gone from being outsiders to God’s own children. As Peter put it: “you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9).

God doesn't just allow us into His presence. In Christ, He came to be with us! He not only was, but still is Immanuel – God with us. He is with us throughout all that we go through in life.

He knows what life is like. Jesus has been lonely. Jesus has lost loved ones. Jesus was unfairly ostracized due to false rumors. Jesus has dealt with the same problems that we have. He understands what we are going through. So, we can turn to Him, knowing that we are not alone.

As we celebrate Christmas, we might do it with a house full of friends and family, or we might do it quietly, fairly alone. But either way, we know that the promise of Christmas is that we will never be truly alone again. God has come into our world to be with us, to be one of us. We also can be sure that Jesus continues to be with us throughout our lives as well. So, when we feel all alone, we can remember that we are not alone. Jesus has come into our world. God is with us!