

For most of us, there is a growing sense of excitement right about now. Plans and preparations are almost done! I'm willing to bet that you've kept up the tradition of buying a gift for someone you, or at least you intend to. There's still time!

But there is a risk involved with gift giving. We all know about it. It's the problem of expectations. How well will my gifts for others match up to what they were expecting? The younger and less mature you are, the bigger the problem. Little children are sometimes brutally honest. If they don't get what they were expecting, they might cry or just let the present fall out of their hands and move on to the next box with no reaction at all.

Most grownups have learned to put a little better spin on it, but we all know that when someone says "What a surprise," it does not necessarily mean I like what I got. That's the risk. What happens when the gift doesn't match the expectation?

Well, listen: God took that risk at the first Christmas, and He is taking that risk again, right now. Will His gift meet your expectations?

I invite you to think about Joseph today—poor, confused Joseph. Mary's pregnancy came as a horrible shock to him and he has only the natural way of thinking about it. Now Joseph wants to do the right thing. He's committed to God's truth about marriage and adultery and faithfulness. So he decides to end his relationship with Mary because he had no idea that this is how God was going to be with His people! Only after an angel comes to him in a dream and directly adjusts his expectations is Joseph ready to accept this gift of "God with us."

This is where Joseph can be our teacher. He allowed God to adjust his expectations of what was possible. To be frank, we have to allow the Holy Spirit to make those same adjustments in us.

In moments of honest need, or in times of life-threatening danger, we know we need God with us. When personal tragedy wraps around us, we instinctively cry out for God--to be with us.

But what do we mean by that? What kind of gift are we seeking? Most of the time, want God to give us better conditions. We want Him to come with power, in strong, obvious, self-evident ways. We've decided who our enemies are and they are "out there." We want God with us to save us from those enemies.

However, when it doesn't happen that way, we wonder why. We may even wonder if God is with us at all. That's when we run the risk of missing the gifts God has given, because we were hoping for something that meets our expectations. But God says to you, my greatest gift to you is not a principle, nor a perk, but a person. My Son, Jesus.

Jesus-- an unexpectedly "quiet" God with us. Remember Joseph? It had already happened and he didn't even know it. When he found out Mary was pregnant with

"GOD with us" in her very womb, he needed a remedial lesson in how "GOD with us" quietly shows up. He shows up through a word of promise.

Jesus--a "quiet" GOD with us. Yes, Jesus' ministry was at times filled with works of power. He healed the sick, fed thousands, drove back the power of Satan. But then He commanded those He helped not to tell anyone, didn't He? At least for a while.

Then there was Jesus' ministry that could be resisted, even opposed. GOD was with His people but they could turn away from Him and hate Him and plot to kill Him.

And they did kill Him. Because Jesus is not only a "quiet" God with us, He is a substitute **for** us. The most unexpected, surprising thing of all is "God with us" on a cross; dying as GOD for us. Jesus in our place. He hasn't come to save us from the enemies "out there," so much as He has come to save us from ourselves. Jesus has come not to give us a solution but to be the solution.

Can a person learn to want the surprising gifts of "God with us"? Joseph did. The Word of God taught him and he turned away from his own expectations. He believed God was with his people through Jesus, conceived in the womb of Mary. We know he believed this through his actions--which from this point forward, were about protecting this little child of the Promise.

Can we learn to want the surprising gifts of "GOD with us? Yes! By the power of that same Word, we can learn. We can learn to trust that God With Us comes in quiet words. God With Us comes in baptismal waters. God With Us comes in bread and wine. God With Us comes in the care and concern of a fellow Christian. We can learn to practice his presence in daily prayer. And your actions will reveal what this little child of the Promise means to you.