

Christmas Eve

December 24, 2018

Our Savior's Way
Pastor Mann

“No jelly!” That’s what he said to me. My brother Eric and I were both in middle school. We had just gotten home from school and we had some chores to do. My Mom had been baking cookies all day. My brother called me over and said, “Hey Billy, if you go out to the barn and clean out the horse’s stall I’ll give you a big surprise.” “Really?” I said. “You promise?” “I promise.”

I ran out the door, out to the barn, got the broom, swept out the stall, put hay and fresh water out for Lynn the horse, and ran back to the house. “Alright,” I said. “I’m finished. Where’s my surprise?” My brother had both his hands behind his back so I knew it had to be something great. I could hardly wait. “You ready?” he asked. I was about to burst. “Come on,” I said. He pulled both his hands out from behind his back.

Now, I have to stop for a minute. You remember, I said that my Mom had been baking cookies all day, right? One of her specialties was thumbprint cookies. You know what a thumbprint cookie is, don’t you? It starts out as a ball of dough. You press your thumb into it and bake it for ten minutes. Once it cools you’re supposed to put jelly or something like that in the thumbprint in the middle of the cookie. I love thumbprint cookies.

Back to my brother. He pulls his hands out from behind his back and each one holds a thumbprint cookie. And with the enthusiasm of a game-show host he shouts, “Look, NO JELLY!” What? That was my surprise? “But you promised,” I said. I was so mad I took off after him and chased him around the house about three times. My brother Eric could always run faster than me. But to this day, if

we want to talk about disappointment, delusion and broken promises, all we have to say is, “NO JELLY” and everyone knows what we mean.

It’s Christmas Eve and I’m glad you’re here. We’re talking about the Christmas promise. Which is a beautiful thing. But, in a crowd like this, I’d be willing to bet that there are some of us who think of Christmas like “NO JELLY”. Christmas promises us joy, love, peace on earth, good will to men. Christmas is a time when families get together and everyone is supposed to be happy. The fire’s blazing on the hearth. Life is perfect. Can I ask you a question? Do you ever get the feeling that Christmas is a whole lot of promise with not much jelly? Here it is Christmas Eve and we’ve been running around full throttle since Thanksgiving—shopping, buy gifts, wrapping gifts, mailing gifts, decorating our houses, going to holiday parties and tomorrow there are 14 people coming over for dinner, and we just hope that Uncle Joe doesn’t drink too much and the in-laws don’t get into a fight like they did last year. Because the kids have had too much sugar and the dog got into the fudge and ruined the carpet you just cleaned, and the boys are fighting over their presents and you’re dreading standing in the return line on Wednesday. Is this really the Christmas promise?

The answer is no. I think one reason we feel a little let down about Christmas is that we’ve forgotten what the Christmas promise really is. Did you ever feel like the three wise guys?—The kings who go wandering around looking for Christmas, end up in Jerusalem, and don’t show up in Bethlehem until maybe a year later. What was the promise anyway? Tonight, let’s turn back the clock, rewind the tape 2,700 years to the time of the prophet Isaiah—***“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the virgin will conceive a child and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”*** 700 years later a nobody little carpenter named Joseph from Nazareth had a dream. In the dream an angel told him some surprising news about his fiancée: ***“Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife for what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. Look, the virgin will conceive and bear a son, and***

they shall call his name Immanuel (which means God with Us)."
My friends--this is the promise! God is with us!

Sometimes, I think, we fall into the "NO JELLY" trap at Christmas because we get it all turned around. I call it Christmas dyslexia. We think the promise is Us with God. God is perfect. We want our lives to be perfect. And they're not. We look around at the world we live in and we ask, "God, why don't you do something to clean up this mess? Why is my life in a shambles? I mean, if you are really God and if you are really perfect, why isn't my life perfect too? Isn't that what the Christmas promise is all about? And so we work extra hard to make everything perfect—at least for Christmas.

But that's a distorted view of the Christmas promise. It's backwards. The Christmas promise is not Us with God—"Lord, take me out of this world. I didn't sign up for this. I don't want these problems." No, Christmas is not about escape. The Christmas promise is "Immanuel"—God with Us in our confusing, messed up world. Jesus with us as a baby in Bethlehem. Jesus for us—dying a bitter death on a cross to pay the penalty for our sins. Jesus in us, in our hearts and walking beside us every day of our lives. This is the amazing story we have to share—that in a world where people thought they didn't need God, where people thought they could live their lives apart from God's love and His truth and His mercy and His grace—we were wrong! We tried to run away. And yet, in spite of our running away, some 2,000 years ago He ran after us. He became one of us so that He could do what we could never do for ourselves. You see, Christmas is a part of a much bigger story—a much bigger promise. Christmas is the thumbprint cookie, but the jelly is Easter and Good Friday. The promise of life eternal. It's the heart of God—His unrelenting love and His unending promise and His undying commitment that wherever we are and whatever life brings **GOD IS TRULY WITH US!**

