



December 2020

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,
which means, ‘God is with us.’” (*Matthew 1:23*)

As we approach Christmas this year, we are very aware that our celebrations will be different from other years. The present pandemic hangs over us like a very dark cloud, making us conscious of the effects of COVID-19 on every aspect of our lives. We worry about our health, our social interactions, and the economic climate. We feel the heaviness and sadness that weighs on our hearts and we even acknowledge questions that rise within our spiritual life. As a result, we experience many uncertainties and anxieties, resulting in a widespread sense of helplessness and hopelessness.

As we reflect on this situation, we are reminded of the Psalms, the prayers of the people in the midst of difficult circumstances: “*Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice!*” (*Ps. 130:1-2*). As these experiences continue, discouragement sets in: “*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?*” (*Ps. 13:1*). Like many today the Psalmist felt abandoned by God asking: “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” (*Ps. 22:1*). Yet, through it all, the Psalms also remind us of the steadfast love and faithfulness of God and *Psalm 136* is a wonderful meditation of the enduring love of God as experienced by the People of Israel.

The birth of Christ at Christmas is the answer to these cries. Jesus was born into the human situation and he fulfilled all the yearnings expressed in the Psalms. Jesus too felt the abandonment of God; he felt the sadness of people not responding to the presence of God; and yet his whole life was a revelation of God’s unconditional love for us.

As we prepare to celebrate Christmas, we realize that the birth of Jesus was a message, namely, that God wants to enter the human situation. In Jesus, God is with us, reminding that he has shared every situation that we experience, except sin. He was present with the sick and suffering, and with those who worried about their loved ones (cf. *Mark 6:56*). He constantly lifted people from their difficulties so that they could return home with new life (cf. *Luke 8:39*). He wept with Mary and Martha at the death of their brother, Lazarus (cf. *John 11:35*). He invited his disciples to share his message and reminded them that he would be with them always to the end of the age (*Matthew 28:20*). He knew pain and suffering and loneliness and betrayal and death. Because he had these experiences, he is able to be with us in every kind of suffering and human situation that we experience (cf. *Hebrews 2:17-18*). He is not only with us, but he invites us to come to him when we are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and He will give us rest (*Matthew 11:28*)

This is the message that we need to hear this Christmas, that Jesus is with us, that God has a deep desire to be with us in every situation we find ourselves. This year the pandemic has made us aware of a need for real hope and peace. While we are not able to gather this year as we normally would, we need to realize the essential message of Christmas that God is with us. God is with us in the uncertainty and anxiety of this pandemic and God is with us in sickness and in suffering. God is with us wherever we are and wherever we find ourselves. This Christmas let us rediscover this reality that God is with us and that God has a tremendous love for each of us.

As a result, we realize that we are not alone, that we are not abandoned. God is with us, and shows love for us by being committed to us as we go through everything. I am reminded of the motto that I have chosen as a bishop: *“Nothing can separate us from the love of God”* made visible in Jesus Christ. This is how we know God’s love. It is the heart of the Gospel message, that God comes to us in the person of his Son and lifts us up by his love and care. This is message that we celebrate at Christmas. Thus, wherever we are, whatever we are facing, let us recognize God in our midst and open our hearts to experiencing God’s loving presence. Let us allow the Lord to enter our lives for his presence will lift us in hope and give us deep peace and unshakeable joy.

This Christmas message inspires us to foster a culture of hope in our lives. For us believers, hope springs from our religious conviction that God, who created us and who sustains us, will never abandon us. Thus, we need to be ‘sowers of hope’ in our families, neighbourhoods and communities. We need to reach out with generous acts of kindness and compassion, to awaken the much-needed hope in our brothers and sisters who are most affected by this pandemic.

I would like to focus this year on one aspect of the Lord’s birth, the fact that he was born in a stable because there was no room for him in the inn. This humble birth gives us a new awareness of those who have no place to live and whose lives are characterized by poverty and homelessness. The Lord asks us to respond to the cares of the needy and I urge all of us to pay attention to the needy in our communities and parishes. Please be generous to local initiatives which are seeking to care for the needy—particularly the homeless.

May the Christmas message that God is with us resound in your hearts and lives as we celebrate this Christmas.

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "† Brian J. Dunn". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

†Brian Joseph Dunn
Archbishop of Halifax-Yarmouth