

Advent 2018 Part 3

They Will Call Him Immanuel

Welcome to the third Sunday of Advent. We spent November talking about who Jesus was and is and I've carried that theme into our Advent series. Last Sunday we talked about the angel's instructions to Mary and Joseph to call his name Jesus because he would save his people from their sin. This morning I want to focus on another of the names we associate with Jesus.

Matthew is the gospel writer that tells of the angel speaking to Joseph in a dream, telling him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife because the child she was carrying was conceived of the Holy Spirit. The angel said you are to give him the name Jesus because he would save his people from their sin. Matthew seems to target a Jewish audience in his gospel because he often points back to the Old Testament, explaining New Testament events as fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. That's what he does here. After telling us about Jesus being conceived of the Holy Spirit and coming to save his people, Matthew adds, **“All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel – which means ‘God with us.’”** **Matthew 1:22-23**

Immanuel. God with us! Do you hear that. God with us! There is a sense in which the nation of Israel understood that. God is with us in that he blesses us as a nation, as a people. He gave us the law, the prophets, the temple. Sure, God is with us.

We say it as Americans. God bless America. We believe God is with us in some broad, “he's out there watching over us from a distance” kind of way, but what the prophet Isaiah said, what Matthew was talking about was something else. Something beyond comprehending. God wasn't just with us in this general sense of providence, he was talking about being with us, in flesh, in time, in history, becoming a human being, born of a human mother but not of an earthly father, born and growing and living among us. God literally-reach-out-and-touch-him with us.

It's mind blowing. We are talking about the Creator God who is holy, transcendent, other, beyond anything we can think being with us in flesh. St. Anselm of Canterbury, who lived a thousand years ago, said **“God is that than which nothing greater can be thought.”** **St. Anselm** He basically then said whatever the greatest thought you can have of God, he is something greater than that. This is the God we are talking about. The God who in Exodus said to Moses, **“You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.”** **Exodus 33:20** Yet here he is, with us. Richard John Neuhaus wrote, **“God is, quite literally, inconceivable. And**

that is why God was conceived as a human being in the womb of the Virgin Mary. Because we cannot, even in thought, rise up to God, God stooped down to us in Jesus, who is Immanuel, which means God with us.” ...Richard John Neuhaus

Here he is. John in his gospel writes, **“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth...No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.” John 1:14, 18.**

Immanuel. God with us. And here he is, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger in Bethlehem. This is the incarnation. This is the mystery. This is the good news! The God of whom no one could see his face is now see-able. Shepherds gaze with wonder. Linger here for a moment. God is with us...in a manger. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian who was executed by the Nazis wrote, **“Mighty God is the name of this child. The child in the manger is none other than God himself. Nothing greater can be said: God became a child. In the Jesus child of Mary lives the Almighty God. Wait a minute! Don’t speak; stop thinking! Stand still before this statement! God became a child! Here he is, poor like us, miserable and helpless like us, a person of flesh and blood like us, our brother. And yet he is God; he is might. Where is the divinity, where is the might of the child? In the divine love in which he became like us. His poverty in the manger is his might. In the might of love he overcomes the chasm between God and humankind, he overcomes sin and death, he forgives sin and awakens from the dead. Kneel down before this miserable manger, before this child of poor people, and repeat in faith the stammering words of the prophet: ‘Mighty God!’ And he will be your God and your might.”...Deitrich Bonhoeffer**

God became flesh and dwelt among us. God as a baby in a manger. God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Now understand a couple of things about the incarnation. The birth of Jesus doesn’t mark the beginning of the Son of God. Jesus is the eternal Son of God, eternally existent. He has always been the Son, the second person of the Godhead (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem marks the eternal Son entering physically into our world.

Understand as well that we can’t understand it all. How can it be that God becomes a man, born of a virgin? Yeah, I don’t know. Mary asked the same question, “How can this be?” The angel told her the Holy Spirit would come upon her and the power of the Most High would overshadow her and the result would be the child conceived in her would be called the Son of

God. Then the angel added, “For nothing is impossible with God!” It’s a mystery but with God all things are possible. God became man to be with us. Fully God and fully man we say. The early church fathers preserved this mystery at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. **“This one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten is made known in two natures which exist without confusion, without change, without division, without separation. The distinction of the two natures is in no way taken away by their union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved. Both natures come together to form one person...They are not separated or divided into two persons but they form one and the same Son, Only-begotten God, Word, Lord Jesus Christ.”** ...Council of Chalcedon It’s a mystery for sure, but it’s a glorious mystery. God became flesh and made his dwelling among us. A baby, fully God and fully man. He is Immanuel, God with us! But, what does that mean for us?

Immanuel means all things are possible. It begins right here. Critics say, “How could a man heal the sick or open blind eyes or make the lame walk? How could Jesus walk on water or calm a storm on the sea of Galilee? How could Jesus feed five thousand with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish? How could he raise a dead girl back to life or a raise a man from the dead who had been buried for four days?” The answer is found here: He is Immanuel. He is God with us! If God is with us then as the angel said, “nothing is impossible with God.”

He is Immanuel, God with us. As I said at the beginning, this is not just in some ethereal, present-like-the-universe is present kind of way. He is present with us, here and now. Jesus, the Son of God who came in the flesh said, **“And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Matthew 28:20.** He is the God who said, **“Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you.” Hebrews 13:5.** Jesus was and is Immanuel. But he ascended into heaven after the resurrection so how is he still God with us? He is with us through the abiding presence of His Holy Spirit.

Jesus said of the Holy Spirit, **“But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.” John 14:18.** Jesus is with us today by the indwelling presence of His Holy Spirit. We aren’t alone. He is with us and if he is with us then all things are still possible! That means the limits are broken off of your life. Miracles are still happening and they can happen in your life. All things are possible when God is with us and that’s who he is. Immanuel. God with us! What does it mean that God is with us?

Immanuel means he understands. God with us, not just around us, not just watching from a distance. He became flesh. Keep in mind he was without sin. He didn’t sin, but he was

flesh so he understands our struggle. He gets it. The writer of Hebrews says, **“Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity... For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.”** He understands our struggle as he takes our place as a merciful and faithful high priest. He continues, **“Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”** Hebrews 2:14-18.

We can't ever say, “God you just don't understand. You don't know what it's like.” He knows. He understands because he is Immanuel, God with us. He knows what it is to be rejected, to be alone and lonely, to be forsaken by your closest friends. He knows what it is to be so weary and tired, physically and emotionally exhausted that he could sleep through a storm at sea. He knows what it is to suffer physical pain and torture beyond our wildest imagination. He understands. He knows what it is to be tempted, to be offered the prize if you'll compromise, choose your own way rather than God's way. He knows what it is to want to quit, to grieve, to wish for another way out. The writer of Hebrews states gratefully, **“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin.”** Hebrews 4:14-15.

He understands, he sympathizes. He doesn't excuse our mistakes and failures, but better than that, because he understands, with empathy he invites us to come to him for the help we need. The writer says, **“Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”** Hebrews 4:16. He understands. He is God with us and he invites us to turn to him, lean on him, trust in him, obey him and we will find the mercy and grace we need to make it through every test, every temptation, every trial! What does it mean for us that God is with us?

Immanuel means he is with us in our brokenness. Let me tell you how much he understands your brokenness. The prophet Isaiah described him like this. **“He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised and we esteemed him not.”** Isaiah 53:3 He gets it! Despised, rejected, man of sorrows, acquainted with grief and suffering. He knows how you feel! I thought of Jesus being born at night according to Luke's gospel. Jesus is with us in the darkness, in the dark night of the soul. Some of you are in a dark place, but he is Immanuel. He is with you in the darkness. Don't be afraid.

Jesus was born in a stable and placed in a feeding trough. It sounds messy to me and if you've been where a baby was born, then you know about the messiness that comes with human birth. It reminds me that Jesus isn't afraid of the messiness of this world, he isn't afraid to touch the lepers and the blind and broken and the mess that we are. He is the Good Samaritan that doesn't hesitate to climb into the ditch with us to rescue us and lift us out.

Life is messy but Jesus knows how to cleanse and heal and mend and make whole. He is Immanuel, here with us and if you will turn to him and surrender your life to him, he will save and deliver and rescue and bring you up and out and into a new life in him. Listen to what I'm telling you, he hasn't come to affirm you in your brokenness, he has come to save you and make you whole. He hasn't come to applaud your courage for living in confusion and sin and shame, He's come to deliver you and save you from hell! Our culture prides itself on its tolerance of sin and accuses the church of being exclusive and intolerant. Let me show you how tolerant and accepting Jesus is. The bible says "The Lord is patient, not willing that any should perish." Jesus is accepting, opening his arms to everyone, but read the rest of the verse. **"He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."** 2 Peter 3:9 He is Immanuel, God with us and he has come to save you, not to leave you as he found you, broken, confused, lost, but to change you, to turn your brokenness into wholeness, to make you the person he created you to be, full of his life and grace, but you come to him in repentance, acknowledging you need his salvation and forgiveness and you surrender your life to Him.

Immanuel means nothing can defeat us. His name means God with us and if he is indeed with us, born among us as a baby in Bethlehem but still with us and within us by His Holy Spirit, then we have no reason to fear. Nothing can defeat us! The Psalmist said, **"The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me? The Lord is with me; he is my helper. I will look in triumph on my enemies."** Psalm 118:6 In that same chapter, in verse 13, the writer said, **"I was pushed back and about to fall, but the Lord helped me. The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation."** Psalm 118:13-14

I've been pushed back. I admit I've even fallen a few times, but I can tell you the Lord has helped me and I'm still here. He is my strength and my song. He is my salvation. I may have fallen but I'm not defeated because he is Immanuel, God with me! I can say with the writer in Psalm 124, **"If the Lord had not been on our side – if the Lord had not been on our side when men attacked us...they would have swallowed us alive; the flood would have engulfed us, the torrent would have swept over us, the raging waters would have swept us**

away...Praise be to the Lord... We have escaped like a bird out of the fowler's snare; the snare has been broken and we have escaped. Our help is in the name of the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth." Psalm 124

Do you hear me? He is Immanuel. He is God with us, a very present help in a time of trouble. He is Immanuel, the God who is near to the brokenhearted. He is with us and Paul tells us in Romans, **"If God is for us, who can be against us?...Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."**

Romans 8:31-39

His name is Immanuel. God is with us and God is for us and we have no cause to fear. Nothing to fear in life and not even death can cause us to fear. You see, when Jesus took on flesh, he faced it all, everything we face, including death. And he conquered it all. He lived life without sin, overcame every temptation and every attack of the devil. He faced death, died, and then took Satan and death by the throat and rose victorious, conquering the devil and defeating death by his own death. In Christ we have life. In Christ we have victory. In Christ we have eternal life.

He is Immanuel. God is with us and that means all things are possible. That means he is with us now, giving us victory, giving us the grace and power we need to say no to sin and yes to God, giving us the strength we need to carry on, giving us wholeness and healing in our brokenness. He is with us, here and now. Reach out to him, call on him and you will find him to be Immanuel, God with us!