

Sermon for Sunday, December 11, 2011
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God With Us
Isaiah 7:10-17, Matthew 1:18-23

7:10 Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, 11 "Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights." 12 But Ahaz said, "I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test." 13 Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also? 14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. 15 He will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. 16 But before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste. 17 The LORD will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah — he will bring the king of Assyria."

Long ago, the prophet Isaiah predicted the birth of a child called Immanuel. Immanuel is a compound Hebrew word meaning “God with us.” That prophecy is now in public awareness. Originally, Isaiah spoke it to one person, named Ahaz. King Ahaz ruled the smaller part of a small, divided nation. His neighbors can tell his nation is ripe for plucking, so don't be too impressed by Ahaz, with his tiny domain and small population. We all know people like Ahaz. They live around here. He has serious problems, he's worried, but he has a plan. He's working his plan. He's independent, bold. He has connections. He's religious, not very religious, unless religion may help him.

His life is a ruin, enemies have attacked from north and east, but he has an idea. It has no link to the faith of Israel. Years earlier, Ahaz rejected the Lord. He closed Israel's temple, worshipped sun and stars, gods of blood and fertility.

What happened next led to the Immanuel prophecy. As so often in the Old Testament, the prophecy has two references – one for that day, 700 B.C., in Israel, and another for Jesus' life. So Isaiah prophesied Immanuel – God with us in his day, as a prototype of Immanuel in Jesus' day. The first is for Ahaz.

1. The Lord offers help in a broken situation (Isaiah 7:1-17)

Early in the reign of Ahaz, two neighboring kings, Pekah king of the northern tribes of Israel and Rezin, king of Aram (Syria), invaded his land and marched toward Jerusalem, the capital city. They planned to take the city and install a puppet king and divide the nation among themselves. Ahaz shook with fear (7:1-2).

Ahaz was a skeptic, yet God, by pure grace, sent Isaiah to offer him blessing. Isaiah said, "Do not be afraid." The invasion, will fail (7:4, 7). Isaiah knew Ahaz would doubt him, so he added a warning: "If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all" (7:9b). Isaiah also made Ahaz an offer: "Ask the Lord your God for a sign." He will grant it so know he will grant you this (7:10).

But Ahaz wanted his independence. He had his own plan to beat the invasion. He wanted no part of Isaiah or signs or God's help. To defeat the invaders, Ahaz asked the great power of the region, Assyria, to help him.

Ahaz didn't want to reveal his plan, so he used a pious ploy. He trotted out religious jargon. "I will not ask [for a sign]; I will not put the Lord to the test" (7:12).

Now it's true that we should not test the Lord. We should not demand that he perform signs or wonders for us. We shouldn't tell God, "Do this and do that for me and I will believe in you" (cf. Gen 28:20-22, Exod 17:1-7).

But God offered to give Ahaz a sign. He knew Ahaz didn't believe in him, so he offered a sign as a gift, token of his unconditional love. When Ahaz rejected the offer, he said, "I want no dealings with God. No gifts, signs. I'll care for my destiny."

Isaiah's reply is deep. He begins, "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign." Meaning: Ahaz will receive a sign whether he wants one or not. This is the sign "A virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." Before this child knew right from wrong, the kings attacking Ahaz would be destroyed. After that, God "will bring the king of Assyria" (7:14-17).

Somewhere in Ahaz's circle, there was a virgin maiden. She would conceive a child and give birth to a child and while he is still very young, the invasion will fail. As Isaiah spoke around 700 B.C., there was no promise of a miracle. Everyone assumed that this virgin would marry and have a child, etc.

Imagine how Ahaz heard this. He wanted an alliance with Assyria. He hoped Assyria's army would come and fight for him. Then, he planned to pay them and let them share in the booty from the defeated armies. Ahaz was probably pleased when Isaiah said Assyria would come. His plan would work! But Isaiah had more to say. When Assyria came, it would do so its own way. Assyria would sweep over the land like a swarm of bees, like a river pouring out of its banks (7:18-19, 8:4-8).

God offered to deliver Ahaz gently, without cost. Ahaz wanted to pay for a mighty army. God says, "OK, do it your way." But when that army comes and sweeps away the invaders, Ahaz won't be able to control it. It will come like a flood. It "will overflow all its channels, run over all its banks and sweep on into Judah, swirling over it, passing through it and reaching up to the neck. It... will cover the breadth of your land, O Immanuel!" (8:7-8).

This last "Immanuel" baffles us. We think of Immanuel as a baby in a manger. But Isaiah's message is important and clear. Isaiah is telling Ahaz, "God offered to be with you to bless. He offers you a sign of deliverance. A woman, currently an unmarried virgin, in your circle will have a child named "Immanuel." That child's life means that the invasion you dread will fail (Isa 7:14-16).

But Ahaz, because you reject God's help and grace and choose your own rescue plan, through an alliance with mighty Assyria, know this: After you work with the king of Assyria, he will work you over. His army will "help" you, then as it wills. Then you will know that I am Immanuel, God with us, whether you like it or not. God is always "Immanuel, God with us." If anyone refuses God's presence to bless, He is still present, to judge and let you face the consequences of our folly.

Why would anyone reject God's grace, blessing? Because people like Ahaz want to master their destiny. They'd rather reign in hell than serve in heaven. They'd rather captain their airship and crash it. They make their own mistakes, and do not follow a good leader. What shall we say?

It's healthy to be responsible for our decisions, to live our lives. It's unhealthy to rebel for no reason or to forget that we're human, not gods. Yes, we must choose our course in life. But, Joshua says, we must choose whom we will serve. We will serve someone – the Lord, or a devilish deity. So for Ahaz: He wanted to carve his own path – an alliance with Assyria. But Assyria soon became his master.

It's tempting to judge Ahaz. He rejected God's grace and he'll pay for it. He asked the Assyrians for help and they plundered his land. He got what he deserved; people like him do. True! If someone rejects God's gifts, they lose them.

First, everyone can play the part of Ahaz. When we face problems, we can play Ahaz too. We ask "Who are my allies? Who can I recruit to my cause? Who owes me skill or strength today, because I lent them mine yesterday or might, tomorrow? Friends, do you plan first and pray second?"

If we point the finger at Ahaz, let's see that we can do the same - and repent. The stronger we are, the more skills we have, the more we solve problems for a living, the more we assume we can solve our problems with four point plans first and prayer second. Maybe not evil plans, but plans that forget God.

Sadly, Ahaz never repented. The Assyrians overran Judah, plundering as they went. Ahaz and Judah tasted the fruit of his folly. That's how sin works. In fact, Ahaz's son, Hezekiah, paid for his father's sin. But the Lord never gives up on his people. He offered grace to Hezekiah, and he enjoyed it for his thirty year reign. We see more of that grace when we next hear of Immanuel, in Matthew 1.

2. The Lord offers help again - Matthew 1 – Immanuel

The events of Isaiah foreshadow Matthew's story. Matthew describes a young woman, Mary, who is engaged to Joseph. Both are believers, yielded to God. The Lord chose Mary for a great but painful privilege. She is the second virgin and she will bear a son named Immanuel. But where the first Immanuel was a *sign* that God is with us, the second Immanuel is not the sign but the reality – God is with us.

Yet it's possible to reject this Immanuel too, for God resolved to join the human race incognito at first. It's a tale oft told in literature. The king is here but no one sees him. In *Lord of the Rings*, for example, soon after Frodo and Sam begin their quest, they meet an ominous stranger named Strider. A Ranger, he wanders, rootless and homeless, keeping his own counsel, eyeing things. The hobbits view him with suspicion, until they learn that he saves their lives – and discover that he is the King of their realm, long exiled from his throne, yet working to save his people.

Jesus came hidden too, far from his realm, in the form of a baby. God chose Mary to be the Mother of the King, the Son of God. The Lord also chose Joseph to be his adoptive father.

Matthew 1:18 His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. 19 Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. 20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

God's plan astonished Mary and Joseph! The Son of God had entered her womb, to grow, to become her baby (Luke 1:35). Mary was "blessed among women" and, surely, cursed by her neighbors. Joseph was God's man – and a fool in the eyes of many. Who would marry a woman – pregnant with someone else's child?

Yet they were willing. Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant" (1:38). (A shining example of hard obedience to a God-given mission. May we be so faithful!) Joseph "did what the angel of the Lord commanded" – he took her as his wife, but did not know her until she gave birth (Matt 1:24-25). He named the child Jesus, as the angel said, to complete Isaiah's prophecy, 700 years before: "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'" (1:22).

Immanuel explains the wonders and enigmas of the gospels. An exhausted Jesus drops like dead weight into a boat and doesn't stir as a blazing storm. Yet when the desperate disciples finally do rouse him, he orders the storm to stop and it obeys. Sleepy man, mighty God. He multiplied bread and fish one day, feeding 5,000 people, woke up hungry the next. Truly man, truly God.

Immanuel means Jesus is God is with us. And Matthew shows the significance of that each time he mentions it in his Gospel - beginning, middle and end.

Beginning, 1:21, *Jesus is Immanuel, God with us, to save his people from their sins* by his atoning sacrifice. He saves or delivers from the consequence of sin – death. He saves from the power of sin – the terrible grip it can gain, the terrible destruction it can cause.

Middle, 18:20, Jesus promises, "Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" – Immanuel. Christians quote this verse when we gather to pray, to remind ourselves that God hears. Rightly so. But originally, Jesus said this to leaders, praying for a disciple, who sinned and refused repent. When leaders deal with rebellion, *Jesus is Immanuel, God with us, to preserve the purity of the church* so we can be true to our identity as the pure church.

The end, 28:18-20, Jesus is Immanuel, God with us, for the church's mission. Jesus told his disciples "Go and make disciples of the nations." It is a great task, so he adds that he does not merely command, he enables: "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (28:19-20). *Jesus is Immanuel, God with us, to empower the church to make disciples.*

Jesus is with us in our need – our sin. In our hardest tasks. In our mission. In times of stress and duress. Jesus is God with us.

I once traveled to Hungary to speak. Hungarian is hard, rare. So it was a great comfort to hear my host promise to be "with me" at all times. And he was with me - except when he was not with me. He got caught in traffic and didn't meet me in an airport where no one spoke English. At the conference, my host was with me, except when my translator was with me. But sometimes she handed me to a third person, who assumed I must know German, which is Hungary's second language. Well, I studied theological German, Reformation era in graduate school. Thank you Jesus, that you were with me when I got sick, without the ability to communicate with anyone. In our distress, our great tasks and trials, Jesus is God with us for our good.

But Immanuel - God with us - is a sobering truth too. A woman was a new counselor, far from here, learning under a mentor who is skilled, empathetic, respected in the community. There was one problem. After she finishes sessions, she mocks the clients she so kindly helps. She mimics their voices, their complaints, gives them degrading nicknames. What can we say? We wish she knew that God is with us. The patients may not hear what she is saying, but God does.

You may think: I've never laughed at anyone like that. Probably not. But who here has *never laughed at anyone*? Who has never said, "I'm tired of empathizing with that complainer?"

3. Living in light of Immanuel - God is with us

So "God with us" is sobering, even frightening because of sin. Yet "God with us" is hopeful because of grace. Paul brings the two together in 2 Corinthians 4. Speaking of the gospel, he says, "We have this treasure in clay pots." He describes the tension of life in this age, its glories and agonies, in 2 Cor. 4:8-11 *8 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. 11 For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh.*

Now if Jesus "is manifested in our mortal flesh," that means it's clear that God is with us. Even if our life is a mortal, sinful mess. Paul adds, "Death is at work in us" (4:12). By this he means physical and spiritual death, disease and moral ruin. Nonetheless, all who believe in God know this: "He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence" (4:14). You hear it – raised with Jesus, in God's presence – that's Immanuel again!

He concludes, "So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. For this momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison... (4:16-17).

Many of you know this as the principle of "the already and the not yet". Important: *We are already* redeemed. We belong to God, Jesus is God with us, in a new life. But fullness of that life is **not yet** here. We wait, we suffer, we wish Jesus fixed everything, gave us glory. But we wait; it's not here yet.

We feel this acutely at Christmas. We want everything to be perfect. We want to commune with the Lord. We want to praise God for his can-you-believe-it sacrifice in coming to earth and dying forsaken for us. We want to commune with God. We want peace on earth, good will to men. We want to purchase perfect gifts, gifts that shout. "I love you."

How we fall short! The recipient looks sad. He's so difficult. Now I remember why it's so hard to love him. What was I thinking? Why did I think a sweater, a sweater! - could prove love? Who told me this? Why did we believe it? I capitulated to the culture *again*. Why do we put such expectations on ourselves? Where did elf myths get the power to make us suffer like this?

If we break with materialism, we want a perfect spiritual experience. Together and happy. Everything just right. But wait. There are sinners and opinionated people in your family. Their idea of a happy Christmas doesn't match yours. You feel the tension. Someone is hurt. "No, no," someone wails, "That's not what I meant!" This is not the way it's supposed to be! Dashed expectations again.

Sad truth – some people, for reasons we cannot fathom, do *not want* to be happy. They are glad they have the power to disrupt and cause misery. Some of you know exactly what I mean. How blessed it is to know that Immanuel – that *God* is with us, even if some in our family are not.

More important than friends and family, God is with us. One more time, this has two sides. Isaiah says God is always with us. The whole Bible agrees. We can never flee from God's presence. He is in heaven and on land and at sea (Ps 139:7-9). We can ignore God, deny God, even curse God. But He never goes

away or disappears. He rules all creation, even hell itself. Pretend uncomfortable events never really happened: Stalin's murder of Ukrainian peasants, the Nazis and the Holocaust, the slave trade that still goes on today. Some groups deny these events, but they still happened.

If we reject God's gracious presence – his help and comfort – he's still God with us. If we say, "I want no part of God. If he exists, which I doubt, I still want work things out for myself. I went to school with Ahaz. He made an alliance and it worked for him, right? He stopped the invasion." We want to orchestrate our deliverance, too. Our plans often work in the short run. We make a deal, we borrow, call in favors. We work harder. Or we bury our problems with alcohol or drugs or some other escape. They all work a while, but not forever.

None can match God's graces. "Immanuel" can mean, should mean, God is with us to bless. With Jesus' birth, Matthew says, God entered human history with new power and grace. By faith, Jesus is always with us.

Debbie and I have the same concerns as every couple. Sometimes there's nothing to do but be together, talk, and pray. It's good to know that she is with me and I'm with her. We remind ourselves that God cares for us, he's sovereign, Immanuel.

What a comfort when a pregnancy is problematic, a child starts first grade, gets on a plane or goes to college. When we can't be with them, God is. What a comfort when we are lonely, sick, guilt-ridden, or afraid. Jesus is Immanuel – God with us.

Jesus life is the story of God with us. Jesus lived such a flawless life that he dared ask his hateful foes "Who of you can convict me of any sin?" They were silent. He comforted the weary, taught the confused, fed the hungry, was executed even though the judge asked, "What crime has he committed?" Then he rose from the dead, was seen in public, demonstrating that he is God's Son, God with us.

I hope you know Jesus' sweet presence. I hope you know it if you're surrounded by love. Behind that is God's blessing, presence. I hope you know it if you're lonely because family deserted you.

I hope you know it for your work. I had a conversation with a Christian retailer of convenience stores. He told me cigarettes and lottery tickets accounted for a lot of his profits. I asked if he wanted to sell tobacco and lottery tickets, given their dangers. He decided that he didn't. But how would it affect his profits? Hardly at all. God was with him – Immanuel – to bless.

Know – Immanuel, not just to command or to give, but to remake you, to enable you. He sent the Spirit, God with us, indwelling us to renew us. To give you the mind of Christ, the love of Christ, God with us so we can be more like Jesus. So I hope you celebrate Immanuel in all its fullness. Jesus: God with us, in the flesh.