

“Immanuel”
Advent Sermon Series – What’s in a Name?
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First Presbyterian Church, Winston-Salem, NC
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(Is. 7:1-17)

Introduction.

One Christmas several years ago, a woman told her four-year-old niece that the whole family was going to come to the aunt's house to exchange names for Christmas. The little girl thought about this for a while, and then she started to cry. Her aunt asked her, "What's the matter, honey?" And the little girl said between sobs, "But I don't want to exchange names. I like being Emily!"¹

Names are important. They give us a sense of identity and belonging. They mark us as an individual, and they tell something about who we are. Over the course of this season of Advent, we have been looking at some of the various names of the Messiah that are listed in Isaiah 9. We have considered the names Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and the Prince of Peace. Tonight, we conclude our series by taking a look at one of the most enduring names given to our Lord – the name Immanuel.

I. The Historical Background to the Name Immanuel.²

To gain a sense of perspective on this name of our Lord, we have to travel back to the 7th century BC. There we can eavesdrop on a conversation between two men – one a nervous and frightened king named Ahaz, and the other a fearless prophet by the name of Isaiah.

The nation of Assyria had the mightiest army ever assembled up to that time in history, and it was poised to the northeast ready to sweep down and conquer Israel and Judah, the northern and southern kingdoms of the Hebrew people. Syria and Israel recognized the threat and formed an alliance to try and stave off the Assyrian advance, and they wanted the southern kingdom of Judah to join them. Ahaz, the king of Judah, knew the danger of such a venture, and he wanted no part of it. As a result, his allies, Syria and Israel, were preparing to march against Judah. They intended to besiege Jerusalem and replace Ahaz with a puppet king more agreeable to their coalition.

Ahaz was in a tough spot. Both his enemies and his friends were preparing to do battle against him. Just then, he had an idea. He would strip his treasury bare and send tribute to the Assyrian king, thereby making himself a vassal. He would

then beg for Assyria's aid against his former allies, Syria and Israel. It would cost Judah her independence, but it just might save his skin.

That's the background to this passage. Just at this point in the story the prophet Isaiah was instructed by God to intercept King Ahaz at the waterworks in Jerusalem. He was told to declare to the king, in effect, "Don't take this course of action, your Majesty. Pull yourself together. Be calm. Don't be afraid of these little, burned-out-two-bit kings who threaten you. God is in control, and He isn't going to let what they plan happen. Just believe."

You can imagine the tension. Ahaz is trying to get ready for a long siege, and he's inspecting the aqueduct designed to bring water into Jerusalem without which the people will literally dry up. He's made a tough political decision in the midst of a severe national crisis, and there is still a great deal of work to be done. And here among all the king's other headaches stands a prophet who doesn't have any political savvy whatsoever. He doesn't seem to understand the national and international dimensions of the crisis, and all the prophet wants to talk about is faith. Doesn't Isaiah realize this isn't a spiritual moment?! The wolf is at the kings' door, and the prophet wants to talk about trusting God!

But Isaiah would not be ignored, and he was convinced that the critical issue here wasn't water systems, or diplomacy, or military preparedness. The critical issue was spiritual, and Isaiah would not yield on this point. He believed in God's faithfulness to His covenant with David, regardless of what the situation looked like on the outside.

Isaiah insisted that the king ask for a sign from God. In other words, he suggested that the king test God to see whether or not the prophet was telling the truth. But Ahaz was afraid that God might confirm Isaiah's counsel, and as a result he would be forced to change his plans. So Ahaz grasped at a straw, and the king said with false piety, "I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test." But Isaiah replied that if Ahaz wouldn't choose a sign, then the Lord Himself will give the king a sign anyway – *"Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (7:9).*

Just at this low point, God delivered a sign of redemption to come: a young woman, a virgin, would conceive and bear a son who would be called Immanuel, "God with us." In the darkest hour, God gave hope and He made a promise. In hindsight, it probably occurred to many that this prophecy was fulfilled (in part, at least) when Ahaz's own son, Hezekiah, succeeded him as king. Bad dad, great son: what a miracle! Hezekiah quickly cleaned out all the idols Ahaz had worshipped, and he restored the worship of the true God of Israel.

However, it is Matthew who records the ultimate fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy in the birth of Jesus to the virgin Mary (Mt. 1:22-23). The Bible says: our leaders may be dreadful, and we may not be much better. And yet God promises

to come and be with us no matter what. He is Immanuel.

II. The Meaning of Immanuel.

Many years ago, I received a Christmas card that had the images of many of the great figures of history down through the ages. There was Buddha, Caesar, Mohammed, Napoleon, Hitler, and many others. The caption read, "History is littered with men who would be God..." Then you opened the card which had a depiction of the baby Jesus in a manger, and the card read, "...but only one God who would be man." The Hebrew name Immanuel literally means "God with us."

In the prologue of John's gospel, we read of the miracle of the incarnation. *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And 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" (Jn. 1:1,14).*

When God came to planet earth 2000 years ago in the form of a little baby, He was literally God with skin on! Philip Yancey writes, "One night in the cold, in the dark, among the wrinkled hills of Bethlehem, [the] two worlds [of matter and spirit] came together at a dramatic point of intersection. God, who knows no before or after, entered time and space. God, who knows no boundaries took on the shocking constraints of a baby's skin, the ominous restraints of mortality."³

In one instant the omnipotent made Himself weak. He who had been spirit became flesh. He who was larger than the universe became an embryo, and He who sustains the world simply with a word chose to be dependent upon the nourishment of a young teenage girl. God was given eyebrows, elbows, two kidneys, and a spleen. He stretched against the walls of a uterus and floated in the amniotic fluids of His mother. God came near. He is Immanuel.

Conclusion.

The promise of Immanuel is the greatest promise of Christmas, because it says that God will be with us no matter what. And the promise of Immanuel is a promise that continues through the ages. The miracle that began at the incarnation continues to this day, and God persists in gracing us with His presence throughout the course of our lives. That's what Christmas is all about. As we close this evening, I want to relate to you a remarkable story of Immanuel – God with us.

A physician in Denver writes, "I was driving home at Christmas from a meeting this evening about 5 o'clock, stuck in traffic, and the car started to choke and splutter and die. I barely managed to coast into a gas station, glad only that I would not be blocking traffic and would have a somewhat warm spot to wait for the tow truck. The car wouldn't even turn over.

“Before I could make the call, I saw a young woman walking out of the ‘quickie mart’, and it looked like she slipped on some ice and fell into a gas pump. So I got out to see if she was okay. When I got there, it looked more like she had been overcome by sobs than that she had fallen. She was a young woman who looked really haggard with dark circles under her eyes. She dropped something as I helped her up, and I picked it up to give it to her. It was a nickel.

“At that moment, everything came into focus for me: the crying woman, the old Suburban crammed full of stuff with three kids in the back (one in a car seat), and the gas pump reading \$4.95. I asked her if she was okay and if she needed help, and she just kept saying, ‘I don't want my kids to see me crying.’ So we stood on the other side of the pump from her car.

“She said she was driving to California and that things were very hard for her right now. So I asked, ‘And you were praying?’ That made her back away from me a little, but I assured her I was not a crazy person, and then I said, ‘He heard you, and He sent me.’

“I took out my card and swiped it through the card reader on the pump so she could fill up her car completely, and while it was fueling I walked to the McDonald's next door, and I bought two big bags of food, some gift certificates for more, and a big cup of coffee. She gave the food to the kids in the car, who attacked it like wolves, and we stood by the pump eating fries and talking a little. She told me her name, and that she lived in Kansas City. Her boyfriend left two months ago, and she had not been able to make ends meet.

“She knew she wouldn't have money to pay the rent on Jan 1, and in desperation had finally called her parents, with whom she had not spoken in about five years. They lived in California and said she could come live with them and try to get on her feet there. So she packed up everything she owned in the car. She told the kids they were going to California for Christmas, but not that they were going to live there. I gave her my gloves, a little hug and said a quick prayer with her for safety on the road. As I was walking back to my car, she asked, ‘So, are you like an angel or something?’

“I said, ‘Sweetie, at this time of year angels are really busy, so sometimes God comes near and is Immanuel by using just regular people.’ It was so incredible to be a part of someone else's miracle. And of course, you guessed it, when I got in my car it started right away and got me home with no problem. I'll take it to the shop tomorrow to check, but I suspect the mechanic won't find anything wrong. You see, God is Immanuel. Often times He comes near us when we need Him the most in special and surprising ways.”

Look for God to be your Immanuel this Christmas. May He come near you tonight. Amen.

¹From *Country Woman*, November/December, 1990.

²Some of the material of this section was adapted from a sermon preached by Paul Eckel in Atlanta, GA December 1977.

³*The Jesus I Never Knew*, pp. 44, 45.