

SERMON: *God's Powerful Presence*
SCRIPTURE: **Matthew 1:22-23**
SPEAKER: **Pastor Dick High**
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Today's Focus – "Immanuel"

There are a number of names or titles throughout the Scriptures used to identify God's Son. Among them we find: Messiah, Son of Man, Lamb of God, Prince of Peace, and Kings of Kings and Lord of Lords. Today, as we begin the 2009 Advent Season, we will focus our attention on the name *Immanuel*, found in Matthew 1.

Introductory Comments

The term *Immanuel* is actually the fourth statement of identification of Christ that is found in Matthew 1. "Son of David" and "son of Abraham" occur in verse 1. Then in verse 21 Joseph is instructed to give the name "Jesus" to the child that Mary bears. It is not until verse 23 that we encounter our term of interest; *Immanuel*.

Although the term Immanuel may be rather familiar to us in the church, especially in association with the Christian season, we may not realize that this word occurs only four times in Scripture: 3 are in the Old Testament (all in Isaiah); 1 is in the New Testament (here in Matthew 1).

The definition/explanation given in Matthew 1 is that Immanuel means *God with us*. While Matthew is written in Greek, and thus the importance of the added definition, anyone familiar with the original Old Testament language of Hebrew would find that explanation redundant, because in Hebrew this is a compound word literally communicating "with us...is God."

Shortly we'll look at the Old Testament passage that introduces this term. Before we do I want us to consider the initial phrase in Matthew 1:22 where it is stated that – *All this took place...* The question that arises is "All of what took place?" I believe the answer includes, at minimum, the following: 1). throughout history God has actively accomplished the fulfillment of various Messianic prophecies given to Abraham and David, doing so through an improbable number of situations and a very interesting variety of individuals (an extended study of the listed genealogy in verses 2-16 is fascinating and supportive of this fact); 2). Mary's impregnation through the work of the Holy Spirit; as a result that Christ took on human flesh (the only time in history that one individual possesses two natures – divine and human); 3). the angelic intervention into Joseph's thoughts and plans, and his obedient response; and 4). the assignment of the name "Jesus" which Joseph is to give to this child when he is born (and this name signifying that his purpose in coming was salvation from sin).

Let me state this another way: In his sovereignty God has actively been at work over centuries of time to fulfill His eternal plan of salvation through the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. In doing so God has balanced both the "big picture" flow of history as well as the individual details necessary for this plan to unfold. I believe the phrase "All this took place..." is intended to stir within us a sense of awe over what God has done and is doing so that people might be brought into personal relationship with Himself. (I suggest this phrase as one that is best grasped through additional meditative reflection.)

***Immanuel* in the Old Testament – Isaiah 7**

Turn with me now to the 7th chapter of Isaiah, the first instance of the use of the term *Immanuel* in Scripture. This chapter records an encounter between Ahaz, one of the kings of Judah, and the prophet Isaiah. For full background information you'd need to read II Kings 16 and II Chronicles 28. The specific situation that

informs this encounter is that two kings, Rezin (Damascus) and Pekah (Israel – 10 northern tribes), have united together to fight against Ahaz (verse 1). They have experienced enough success to stir fear in the heart of Ahaz and the nation of Judah (verse 2). The term used to express their response in verse 2 – “shaken” – conveys a sense of being **staggered**. It speaks of a repetitive swaying or vacillation. This is the situation into which Isaiah enters, being directed by God to speak to Ahaz.

Isaiah’s first words, as found in verse 4, are “Be careful.” I find that a rather interesting introductory statement. The term speaks of the need to exercise great care, to be diligent, and to be on one’s guard. I believe the message being conveyed to Ahaz is his need to carefully think through his response to this threatening situation. What II Kings and II Chronicles reveal is that he was a wicked king. He lived in ways that frequently displeased God. We also learn from those chapters that his ultimate response to this situation will be to seek an alliance with Assyria, the major power in that area of the world at that time. God’s desire, as stated in these two words, is that Ahaz step away from responses that would be familiar or reflective of the general direction of his life; and that Ahaz would consider including God in his response.

Continuing in verse 4, notice what else Isaiah is instructed to say. “Keep calm.” “Don’t be afraid.” Do not lose heart.” A response of panic and thoughtless action needs to be avoided. Like Jesus’ words in calming the storm on the Sea of Galilee, I believe these words to Ahaz are intended to bring calmness to his heart.

When we skip down to verse 7, we find the reason why God would encourage this calmness. There we read that God directly states the plotting and planning of these two kings against Ahaz will not come to fruition. The situation is not minimized; God is only stating the ultimate outcome that he will bring about..

Even though Ahaz is a wicked king, this encounter from Isaiah was suggesting to Ahaz to let the Lord be the one he would rely upon for deliverance. This is an invitation to a response of faith! Recall these words from Psalm 121 – *I lift up my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. (He will not let your foot slip – he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber or sleep.)* Surely, these words express the kind of response God desired to receive from Ahaz.

The critical importance for Ahaz to respond in faith to God and His word at this time is addressed directly now in the second half of verse 9 – *If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.* In essence God has thrown down the gauntlet with this strong encouragement to Ahaz to trust Him at this time. The very destiny of Ahaz and his nation is tied up with their readiness to believe God and act accordingly.

As further encouragement, God offers to give Ahaz a sign (verses 10 & 11). Please notice the gracious way in which God asks this when He says; *Ask the Lord your God...*) God seeks to woo Ahaz to trust Him on a personal level! God offers to Ahaz the opportunity to select some sign that will meaningfully reinforce to Ahaz God’s promise.

It is at this point that the wicked heart of Ahaz is revealed in verse 12. His answer may have the sound of self-effacement and humility, but it really conveys a refusal to trust God. **Ahaz is not going to submit himself to any answer that will entangle him in faith and obedience.** (Think about that; what a sobering response!)

God’s response is one of rebuke (verse 14) and a commitment to proceed with a sign regardless of Ahaz’s response. *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.* (Notice – there is no additional interpretative phrase here that Matthew adds – “God with us.”)

We're not going to take the time today to focus on the initial fulfillment of that sign. (There are various suggestions, but no clear, definitive conclusions regarding the child's identity in this context.) Suffice it to say that what God provides through this sign is a **living, visible statement and reminder** that in his powerful presence (*God with us*) there is the assurance of deliverance. He has promised to intervene, he has invited a response of faith, he has sought to empower for obedience, he has provided assurance that he does not abandon or forsake his people, and he has confronted the futility of human plans. All this provides **significant background** to understanding the text of Matthew 1 where Christ is identified as the one who will be called *Immanuel*. (Please hold these thoughts and phrases in your minds; we'll return to them later.)

Investigating the History of God's Presence

Before we return to Matthew 1, however, I believe we'll gain something by looking briefly at **earlier** instances in Scripture that report promises to other individuals of God's powerful presence, even though the specific term *Immanuel* is not given in any of these instances. The passages and instances selected are ones in which the root Hebrew word "with us," which is part of the term Immanuel, is used. One thus observes a clear thought connection with the prophetic statement made to Ahaz in Isaiah 7.

The first instance in Scripture that I draw to our attention depicts the account of Genesis 26:3 where God states to Isaac – *I will be with you...* This is spoken to Isaac during a time of famine during which God reminds him of his promise and assures Isaac of God's direction during this challenging time.

The second scenario to which I draw our attention occurs twice in the life of Jacob. See Genesis 28:15 or 31:3, 42 where God states to Jacob that **he both is and will be with him**. The first occasion is during his flight from home; the brother that he had deceived, Esau, had intentions of killing him. The second occasion is as he is given direction by God to return home, knowing that he will again encounter Esau!

The third situation is drawn from Exodus 3:12 where God promises Moses *I will be with you* as Moses considers his response to God's call to lead Israel out of Egypt. Later, in Exodus 33:16, Moses voices his understanding of the significance of God's powerful presence when he states *If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here*.

Finally, in Joshua 1:5 & 9 God echoes what Moses had already sought to convey to Joshua in Deuteronomy 31:6 & 8 that he would be with Joshua (just as he had been with Moses).

I realize it is speculation on my part, but I wonder if Ahaz was aware at any level of this history and Biblical theme. These are definite and distinct reminders of the powerful presence of God having impact in challenging circumstances. Regardless of Ahaz's awareness, the theme is there. In Isaiah 7 that theme is clearly strengthened in a significant way. But it is not until Matthew 1 that we encounter the full expression of both the theme of God's powerful presence and the ultimate identification of *Immanuel*.

Immanuel – Christ is the Ultimate Expression

Let's return now to Matthew 1, where I will read again verses 22 & 23. ***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."

I emphasize again the initial phrase in verse 22 – ***All this took place...*** I am drawn to think of various doxologies in Scripture that would help us fittingly express what all is included in the scope of that phrase. Romans 11:33 – *Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!* Ephesians 1:3 – *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every*

spiritual blessing in Christ. Jude 25 – *to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.* And then from Hebrews 1:1-3 – *In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being...*

In all the fullness with which we can think of the identity of Immanuel, Jesus Christ is the **ultimate expression** of *God with us!* Christ is *God with us* in the most unique way; **as the incarnate Son of God!!!** Beyond any statement that God is with us, in Christ, God is **literally present in person**, in the flesh!

His coming in this way, drawing on the imagery parallel to that observed in Isaiah 7, is because **we have a great need**. Like Ahaz, we are in need of deliverance. The deliverance offered is only something God can accomplish. He invites us to a response of faith. He challenges us to abandon any self-effort to find our own solution to our need.

Wednesday morning I saw a bumper sticker that I had not seen before. As a preface to telling you what it said, I would assume that many of us have seen bumper stickers that reference being “born again.” Well, this one was similar, **but also quite different**. The message conveyed is a response to, or even a rebuttal to the phrase “born again.” There were five words on the bumper sticker: “Born Ok The First Time.” It is my understanding that these words are intended to convey the belief that there is no need to be born again. There is no need for a Savior. There is no need for deliverance for sin.

Scripture directly contradicts that understanding. There is a deliverance that all need. That deliverance is from our sin! That is a deliverance that **only** God can accomplish. We must abandon any hope of obtaining this deliverance through our own schemes and resources. Faith is the only acceptable response.

It is because of this great, very real need of salvation that God sent *Immanuel*, His Son, through the incarnation, to ultimately accomplish deliverance from our sin through His death on the cross!!

In The Great Doctrines of the Bible (pg. 70) William Evans writes “It is not putting the matter too strongly when we say that the incarnation was for the purpose of the atonement. Jesus Christ partook of flesh and blood in order that He might die (Heb. 2:14). ‘He was manifested to take away our sins’ (I John 3:5). Christ came into this world to give His life a ransom for many (Matt, 20:28). The very purpose of the entire coming of Christ into the world, in all its varying aspects, was that, by assuming a nature like unto our own, He might offer up His life as a sacrifice for the sins of men. The faith of the atonement presupposes the faith of the incarnation.”

Dr. J. Gresham Machen has pointed out, “The doctrine of the Deity of Christ is part of the Biblical teaching about God. This person whom we know as Jesus Christ would have been God even if no universe had been created and even if there had been no fallen man to save. He was God from everlasting. His Deity is quite independent of any relation of His to a created world. The doctrine of the incarnation, on the other hand, is part of the doctrine of salvation. He *was* from everlasting, but He *became* man – at a definite moment in the world’s history, and in order that fallen man might be saved.”

Someone has stated it this way:

If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator.

If your greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist.

If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist.

If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer.

But our greatest need was forgiveness, so God sent us a Savior. (**Immanuel, God with Us!**)

Praising the God Who is With Us

In my study and examination of the Biblical teaching about *Immanuel*, and the repeated statements and demonstration about the powerful presence of God, I found my mind stretched more and more to grasp the infinity of God and his eternal perspective regarding salvation. While there are certainly personal applications to the truth that Jesus Christ is *Immanuel*, the sweep of the brush and the size of the canvas on which that truth is painted are infinitely broad. From that perspective I offer these reasons to respond in praise to the God who is with us, especially as we begin the Advent season anew! Each of these reasons is rooted in a Biblical understanding of *Immanuel* – God with us!

His faithfulness to his Word is affirmed. The prophecy that God gave to Ahaz was stated more than 700 years prior to the birth of Christ. One of the foundations upon which you and I, as believers, can persist in our relationship with Christ is through repeated affirmation that God is always faithful to his Word!!! Daily you and I face choices of obedience. They are likely not of the consequence and magnitude faced by Ahaz. But they are choices to respond in obedience to God on the basis of trusting His word that He is present with us and that He does keep His promises. I trust we're encouraged this morning as we consider the reality of what is stated in Matthew 1:22 & 23, the coming of *Immanuel* is a strong statement of the truth that God is faithful to His word.

His love for us is demonstrated – personally and profoundly. John 3:16 states this familiar truth in this way: *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* Romans 5:8 echoes that truth with these words: *You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

Salvation is accomplished. Three weeks ago in Pastor Josh's sermon from Hebrews 2, he emphasized the necessity of the incarnation. Here are the 14th and 15th verses of that chapter: *Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. God's gift of forgiveness for our sin is available because Christ was willing to, in the words of Philippians 2, make himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, and being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross. This is what it meant for Him to become *Immanuel*. And as *Immanuel*, He accomplished God's plan of salvation!*

His perpetual presence is assured. I find it very interesting, and strongly encouraging, to note that this same book, Matthew, which in the first chapter introduces us to *Immanuel*, closes with this statement: *And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age* (Matthew 28:20b) God keeps this promise each day through the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit. *I will ask the Father, said Jesus, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth.* (John 14:16-17)

Join me this year in giving praise to God for these reasons!