

Pastor Geoffrey R. Boyle
Christmas Eve
24 December 2011
Grace Lutheran Church, Wichita
Matthew 1:18-25

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

Tonight we gather with the oxen and donkeys, the shepherds and angels,
with Mary and Joseph—all together around the manger.

Tonight we rejoice at the birth of God in the flesh, *for us*—
the infant King,
the lowly savior.

And as St. Matthew tells how the birth took place, he says:
**“All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:
‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call His name *Immanuel*’
(which means, God with us)”** (Mt 1:22-23).

This is, perhaps, the most famous Old Testament prophecy we know.

But we don’t know it from Isaiah, we know it because Matthew quotes it.
If it weren’t for Matthew’s Gospel, we’d never consider this passage to be about Jesus.

Let me explain why.

In the middle of the 8th century b.c. Assyria was the political power house—
they were conquering lands and people all throughout the region,
so the people of Israel were terrified.

Before Assyria turned its face to the northern kingdom of Israel,
the King of Israel, Pekah, decided to form an alliance with the king of Aram,
Rezin was his name.

This alliance between Israel and Aram was for the sake of self-preservation.
They also thought for their survival, they’d need to conquer the southern Kingdom of
Judah and employ all of their forces as well—
possibly even using the Temple in Jerusalem as a fortress.

When Ahaz, King of Judah heard about this alliance between Israel and Aram up in the north,
he was terrified—
Isaiah says, **“the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees
of the forest shake before the wind”** (Isa 7:2).

And because Ahaz was afraid,
the Lord sent the prophet Isaiah saying,
**“Do not fear, do not let your heart be troubled...
[this alliance] shall not stand, it shall not come to pass...
If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all”** (Isa 7:4,7,9).

With this the Lord tells Ahaz that there is nothing to fear, the Lord's in control,
he and his people shall be saved.

But Ahaz doesn't believe.

"We won't come through this one," he thinks, "at least not just sitting back and trusting God!
We've got to do something about it!"

Ahaz figures there must be a plan, a political maneuver, a strategy that can work.

Ahaz doesn't believe that God alone will do the saving.

So, recognizing Ahaz's fear and doubt, we hear again the Lord plead with Ahaz,

**"Ask a sign of the Lord your God;
let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven"** (Isa 7:11).

But, Ahaz won't ask.

Again, he refuses to believe the Lord's promise of deliverance.

Ahaz hides his inward unbelief behind a very pious sounding outward response:

"I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test" (Isa 7:12).

How often do we do the same—

covering up our unbelief by saying the right words, dressing the right way, and showing
up to Church when we know others are watching?

This sort of false piety, false holiness, might fool some of us—

but it doesn't work with the Lord—

He sees right through this hypocrisy!

So the Lord gives the sign anyhow!

And what is this sign?

"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel"
(7:14).

Immanuel—*God with us!*

If we stop here, we think this is great news!

But if, being a curious reader, you kept reading in Isaiah,

you'd quickly find that Immanuel isn't any good news at all!

In fact, this is quite clearly a prophecy of doom!

He says,

**"The Lord will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father's
house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from
Judah—the king of Assyria"** (Isa 7:17).

Immanuel, *God with us*, is the sign of destruction for Israel.

In the King of Assyria God comes to His people in punishment, as a payment for their sin.

There's nothing good about *God with us*,
 unless He comes in forgiveness.

The same goes for us today.

Just think about it for a moment—
 when you're caught in a lie to your parents,
 or looking at a website you shouldn't,
 or stealing something from the corner store,
 or gossiping about that guy you can't stand,
 who's the last person you want with you?
 Is it not God?

And we're not so different from Adam and Eve either.
 When they first ate the fruit of disobedience,
 when they first trusted their own reason and not the Word of God,
 what'd they do?

They hid.
 They were ashamed and didn't want to see God,
 the didn't want *God with us*!

As sinners, God is terrifying.
 He's the one we've rejected.
 He's the one we've offended and disobeyed and ignored.
 And we can't help but think that if He knew what we did we'd really get it.

And so this sign of Immanuel, *God with us*, is the last thing we sinners want!

But that's what makes Christmas so miraculous.
 That's what makes tonight so strange, so otherworldly, so—*divine*.

Tonight we celebrate *God with us*,
 but not in wrath, not in anger, not in retribution.

God is not with us to punish, though we certainly deserve it—
 He's with us to save:

**“You shall call His name *Jesus*,
 for He will save *His people from their sins*” (Mt 1:21).**

This *Immanuel*, isn't like the King of Assyria who came with destruction in Isaiah's time.
 And this *Immanuel*, isn't like anything we'd ever expect.

In Jesus, in the babe born of the Virgin Mary, in this infant who lay in the manger,
God is with us—
 but not in punishment or wrath or anger or expectation—
 He's with us only for grace, for mercy, with forgiveness.

It's in the birth of Jesus that the prophecy of Isaiah finds its true fulfillment.

Because with Christ you are forgiven.

Sin is finally paid for, it's conquered and defeated by Jesus' death on the cross.

You no longer have to put up a false holiness,

you don't need to say the right words or dress the right way or somehow cover up what's eating away at you on the inside.

With Christ your search for finding favor with God comes to an end—

it's not by your work, how well you do,

it's not by your seeking or your emotional experience,

it's not by your decision or your knowledge of Him—

none of this will get you anywhere with God;

nothing in you will do.

What gets you right with God is God coming to you,

Immanuel—God with us.

Christmas is that simple.

It's all for you.

God with you—

God *for you*.

In this babe born of Mary, this infant child,

God is truly with us—

once and for all—

not in wrath or punishment,

but in the child who brings peace and forgiveness and mercy.

That is *Immanuel*.

That's *God with us*.

And this God who is with us in Christ,

is the God for us on the cross,

and the God put in us in the sacrament.

And by this Jesus Christ alone, your salvation is won and given to you freely.

Merry Christmas!

Our *Emmanuel* has come!

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit