

Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23

Christmas Eve

Lessons for the Day: Isaiah 7:10-14; 1 John 4:7-16; Matthew 1:18-25

Welcome, O Emmanuel!

December 24, 2020

*“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”*

*“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.)”*

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Papido, why can't I see you?

That was the question asked by my granddaughter when I called her one day. We often have the opportunity to use Google Duo, the equivalent of Apple FaceTime for you iPhone users. These video calls are pleasant because it is nice to be able to see the grandchildren; to watch them engage in different activities; to see some of the pictures they are drawing, or the games they are playing. But this day, I just telephoned. I don't like the heavy data use of the video calls when I'm away from Wi-Fi, so we just talked. But my granddaughter wanted to see me. And, of course, it tugged at my heart when she wanted me to come and be with her.

Tonight we have something better than Duo or FaceTime. God made a glorious promise in the words of our text. It is the promise that is fulfilled, and which we celebrate this night. In a miracle of grace beyond our understanding, God doesn't "call it in". He Himself descends from heaven to be one with us in all of the cares of our lives. He comes and He is Emmanuel—God with us!

Our text is one of the best-known prophecies of the Old Testament. But while we know this prophecy and know its fulfillment in Christ, we may not be as familiar with the events that surround the giving of this prophecy. It is at a time of crisis between the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern Kingdom of Judah. The unbelieving, faithless northern kingdom is in an alliance with Syria, and plans to overthrow Ahaz, who is ruling over Judah. In an effort to protect himself and his kingdom, Ahaz decides to use the temple treasury to buy the help of Assyria. The Lord God sends Isaiah to warn Ahaz that he is looking for help in the wrong place. Trust God, is Isaiah's message. He is your best ally. He is invincible. If God is with you, you cannot be defeated.

In an effort to assure Ahaz of this, God says through Isaiah: *“Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.”* (Isaiah 7:11, ESV) Imagine God telling you to ask for anything as proof of His promises to you! He will give it: just ask. God offered anything in heaven or on earth as a sign. But Ahaz pretends to be humble and pious: “No, thanks, I couldn't tempt Yahweh!” He wasn't really being pious. He was putting God off, because he still has his doubts. He thinks his own plan is better.

But even in the midst of Ahaz's unbelief, God has a gift for him: *“the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”* In the immediate context, this was a figurative way of predicting that within nine months it will be so evident that God is with his people that a new mother will name her son Immanuel, testifying to the wonderful truth that “God is with us.” The plans of the unbelieving northern kingdom would fail against the house of David. God would not allow them to carry out their evil plans.

God also had a greater deliverance and plan for His people. Our God will deal with an enemy far worse than those the kingdom of Judah was facing. It is the ancient enemy, the devil, who has been warring with all of mankind since the day he lured Adam and Eve to trust themselves rather than trusting God. God has to deal with our sinful hearts, which keep us from seeing His love at work, even in the dark times of our lives. God gives us a sign that He has defeated our enemies and brought us His salvation. But it is more than just a sign. In our Gospel Lesson these words of Isaiah find their absolute fulfillment in the birth of Jesus Christ. The virgin does conceive, by the power and will of Almighty God. In a miracle that truly defies our understanding, God takes into Himself our human flesh. As the apostle John reminds us: *“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”* (John 1:14, ESV) Yes, God has come to earth from heaven. We are blessed that Christ is born! He is Emmanuel: God with us.

In their own way, our lives are not all that much different than that of Ahaz. The gloom surrounding those days when Isaiah made his prophecy was rather intense. But we have our own gloom and doom. It may not be an enemy from the north—but we do worry about the stress and uncertainty of things. If you are like me, you are tired of hearing about COVID; tired of the news and numbers and everything else. We are tired of hearing that this year is so different because of COVID. The truth is this year isn't really all that different. Yes, there are changes in our gatherings and our celebrations. Yes, there are restrictions that keep us from things we normally enjoy at Christmas. Like Joseph, we have our plans, our futures all worked out, but then things begin to unravel. It isn't just COVID. Think of the many times when people have felt so overwhelmed that they ask, "Where are you, God?" It may be because we or someone we love is facing a serious, even fatal illness. Maybe the doctors have said it is only a matter of time. In the pain, the fear and the uncertainty, we reach out and ask, "where are you, God?" That question is also asked by the family standing by the bedside, fervently praying for a miracle. "Where are you, God?" In the darkness of war, when death is all around, people ask, "where are you, God?" When it seems to us that God is far from us we are inclined to ask, "where are you, God?"

In that question we ask for a sign. In our confusion and uncertainty, we want some evidence that God is doing what needs to be done. It may not be through an angel or a heavenly vision like Joseph received, but God says to us the same things that He said to Joseph: Don't be afraid. Things are happening as I desire. It is in my plan. I will bring you through it and everything will be okay.

And to prove that He is a God of His Word, the Creator of All, the King of Kings gives us a sign of His goodness, a gift of His love. In that manger in Bethlehem, God answers that question, "Where are you God?" He is here, with His people! He comes to earth from heaven to be Immanuel: God with us. In a few moments the words of one of the carols will remind us that Christ was "Pleased as Man with man to dwell, Jesus, our Immanuel!" (LSB 380:2). He came to save us, and yes, that means He came to save us from ourselves. We can never celebrate the beauty and joy of Christmas from the very purpose of Christmas. As Luther said in his explanation of the Second Article of the Apostle's Creed: *I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity.* (SC, 2<sup>nd</sup> Article)

Christ is born to redeem you. He came to suffer on the cross as He takes your sin, your unbelief, your indifference and every other evil in you into Himself. He dies to pay your redemption price. Praise be to God! He also rises from the dead to destroy death and hell for us. In all these things, He is Immanuel: God with us. He is the God who is for us. He is that glorious sign of God's love and favour for you and for all people.

More than that, He is the God who is always with you. The psalmist asked the question: ***"Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me."*** (Psalm 139:7-10, ESV) That promise is revealed in the manger. It is seen at the cross and in the empty tomb. That promise is sure and certain because the Child who is born for us is Emmanuel: God with us. In every dark corner, or hidden recess, or distant land He makes His presence known. He is always the God who is with us.

As you celebrate Christmas this year it may be that not everything is as you would want it. Relationships can be strained at this time as much as at any other, and probably more so. The separation and isolation of this year seems especially painful. The loss of loved ones is more noticeable at Christmas. Uncertainties and anxieties spoil the season of peace on earth—health, work, children, parents, even faulty cars and leaking roofs. And when we are honest, we know our hearts are not truly ready to greet the God who comes to be with us.

And yet, in the midst of it all God has given you a sign. For years Hallmark Cards reminded people that when you care enough to send the very best, you send a Hallmark card. (Sometimes I think I should get a commission for the plugs that companies get when I mention their products). God takes that to an even greater level, to an even greater reality. When God wanted to send the best, He sent His Son, who brings us life and salvation. In each and every moment of our lives; in every up and down, joy or sorrow, victory or crisis, we don't have to look to ourselves. We look to the One who came to save us by giving His life for us. We look to the One who rose again and lives to lead and guide us. We look to the One who was and is and always will be the God who is with us: our helper, our Saviour, our Lord. Amen.