



**SMALL GROUP RESOURCE**  
**ST ANDREW'S CHURCH, COBHAM**

# **Immanuel, God with us!**



**January, 2017**

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## THEME AND PASSAGES

‘God is with us.’

Bible Passages: Isaiah 7:10-16, Matthew 1: 18-24.

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## WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

### OPENING PRAYER

Let me not seek away from You what I can only find in You: peace and rest and joy and bliss, which abide only in Your abiding joy. Lift up my soul above the weary round of harassing thoughts to Your eternal presence. Lift up my soul to the pure, bright, serene, radiant atmosphere of Your Presence, that there I may breathe freely, there repose in Your love, there be at rest from myself, and from all the things that weary me; and from there to return, clothed with Your peace, to do and bear what pleases You. Amen.

[Adapted from E.B. Pusey]

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## CONTEXT OF THE PASSAGE

If there is ever a time when we need the presence of God with us more than ever, it is at the beginning of a new year. This is all the more important as the world faces the effects of the events of the last year. Brexit, the advent of Donald Trump, the rise of far-right politics and nationalism amongst many other events, have created a sense of anxiety and uncertainty. As a church, we also face the uncertainty of the interregnum with Robert’s retirement.

We can only face these uncertainties collectively and individually trusting in the promise of God as Immanuel - God with us.

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## BIBLE PASSAGES

### Isaiah 7:10-16 (NRSV)

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, ‘Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.’ But Ahaz said, ‘I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.’ Then Isaiah said: ‘Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.’

### Matthew 1: 18-24 (NRSV)

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to

dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do 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 as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,'" which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

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## **REFLECTION**

Immanuel means more than just a baby, as the Bible clearly states that the baby is a sign. It will be good if we can unpack what the word means in the different contexts it was used in the Bible. I will be doing this through a series of questions.

### **What did Immanuel mean to Isaiah?**

To answer this question, we need to understand the context of the event that led to the prophesy delivered by Isaiah.

In our reading from Isaiah, we heard of King Ahaz of Judah. At the time of his reign, Israel, the people of God, were divided into two kingdoms, Judah and Israel. Ahaz, as King of Judah, was a king whom many would say was wicked and evil. He sacrificed his own children to idols in the name of knowing what the future holds for him. His faith was not in the God of Israel but only in the images that he worshipped.

At the time of his reign, both kingdoms (Israel and Judah) were tormented and oppressed by the Assyrians, who were the "superpower" in the region at the time. Ahaz knew his army could not defeat them, in the same way that the king then reigning over Israel and other neighbouring kings knew they could only defeat the Assyrians if they all formed an alliance and joined their armies.

With this in mind, the King of Israel and the King of Syria approached Ahaz to form this alliance but he refused.

Then God sent Isaiah to him to reassure him that he would deliver him from the hands of the Assyrian empire and that he should form the alliance with the other kings. But Ahaz refused to believe in this promise. Due to his unbelief, Isaiah asked him to ask God for a sign, but Ahaz refused saying he would neither ask God for a sign nor put God to test.

Despite Ahaz's unbelief, the Lord promised to deliver his people. The sign that the promise would be fulfilled would be the birth of a child who was to be called Immanuel.

So, what did Immanuel mean to Isaiah?

To Isaiah, Immanuel meant that in the midst of all the trials that the nation of Judah faced, and even though their king had betrayed them and buckled under the pressure of men and kings and politicians, God remained with His people as their defender and deliverer.

Immanuel signifies not only hope but also judgment upon Ahaz, judgment upon Assyria, Israel and Syria, and deliverance of God's people.

### **What did Immanuel mean to Matthew?**

Someone once used this illustration. Imagine an artist drawing a picture of a winter twilight; the trees in the picture are heavily laden with snow, and there is a dreary, dark house in the background that looks lonely and desolate. Right there, in the midst of the storm, all that can be seen is a dark black house shadowed with the silhouette of these trees. It is a sad picture, but then with a quick stroke - just one quick stroke - with a yellow crayon - the artist simply puts in a streak of light coming from the window. The effect is transforming and magical, because the entire scene is translated into a vision of comfort, a vision of cheer. Immanuel to Matthew and the earlier readers of his Gospel was that stroke of yellow crayon.

The Israelites had been living under Roman occupation. It was depressing for them as the chosen people of God. Times were dark, the promised Messiah had been expected for so long that many had lost hope of his coming. The coming of Immanuel was light into the darkness. It was deliverance from the Roman occupation. It was freedom from oppression and it was the triumph of God over the forces of evil and darkness.

### **What did Immanuel mean to Mary and Joseph?**

Like many Jews at the time, both Mary and Joseph would have been aware of the prophecy of Immanuel, the Messiah coming to save God's people.

However, I am not sure they would have been filled with joy as we are often led to believe. Could Mary be filled with joy, getting pregnant before marriage in a society where this was forbidden? Could Joseph be happy that his betrothed was pregnant with a child from another source? Of course not; they would have been filled with trepidation, fear and anxiety. Each would have been asking themselves, Lord, why me? What have I done to deserve this? It's no wonder the Bible says that Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose Mary public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. Before he could do this, God spoke to him with words of reassurance. Immanuel, God with you.

*To Mary and Joseph, Immanuel is a promise of an ever-present God. A God who will provide. A God who will protect. A God who will neither disgrace nor abandon.*

### **What should Immanuel mean to us?**

John Wesley on his death bed, surrounded by friends and family, was reported to have suddenly opened his eyes and exclaimed for the very last time these words: 'The best of all is this: God is with us'. He could have said various things, but he said that the best of all is this. To John Wesley, Immanuel means that even at the point of death, despite the pain and sorrow, God was with him.

What do we really mean when we say or sing 'Immanuel, God is with us'?

I mentioned earlier that the word Immanuel could be found in only in three places in the Bible. The first is in Isaiah 7, the second in Matthew 1. The third place is in Isaiah 9. Here, we find a further description of the child to be born and called Immanuel. He is not just a sign that God is with us, He is with us a wonderful Counselor, as a Mighty God, as an Everlasting Father and as Prince of Peace. He is with us wherever, whenever and with whoever we are. He is with us as He is with Isaiah to bring judgment and give us hope. He is with us as He was with Mary and Joseph to bless, to protect and to reassure. He is with us as He was with the early church to empower and equip. He is with us whether we acknowledge Him or not. In good times as well as not so good times, God is with us.

I don't know what you might be going through today, what you might have gone through this year and what you might be dreading for next year or the years after. All I want you to know and hold fast to is that God is with you. And He will always answer when called upon.

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ✚ King Ahaz of Judah was of two minds because he trusted only what he could see. Have you experienced a situation where you were of two minds when making a choice? Could you share these with your group? How did you resolve this? With hindsight, could you see how you were guided by God?
  - ✚ The Angel of God appeared to Joseph in a dream and gave him reassurance and instructions. Have you ever had the same experience of God speaking to you in a dream? What was this like? What was the outcome?
  - ✚ 'The best of all is this: God is with us'. This was the reported last statement from John Wesley. What exactly do you think he meant?
  - ✚ God is with us in good times as well as in bad times. Would you agree with this? Could you think of times when this has been the case for you? Could you share your experience with your group?
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## APPLICATIONS

- ✚ God is always with us but often we lose sight of this. A possible way of reminding ourselves is to have a reminder of this. You could purchase a special bookmark, cross, coffee mug, tea cup or other object to remind yourself of God's presence with you always. You could do this as a gift to someone else who might need to hear that God is with them.
  - ✚ Often we are filled with a sense that we are not worthy for God to be with us. Is this your case or that of someone you know? It might be helpful to read the genealogy of Christ through Mary and Joseph (Luke 3:23-38 and Matthew 1). Compare the two versions and lay particular emphasis on the women mentioned in the stories. Then spend time reading about them as follows: Tamar (Gen 38), Rahab (Joshua 2), Ruth (Book of Ruth), Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11). After doing this, you would realize that if God could accept these women in the lineage of Christ, He can also accept you. Then pray a prayer inviting God to come and be present with you. If this is not for you, you could recommend it to someone who might need to hear of God's acceptance.
  - ✚ St. Andrew's is approaching a time of uncertainty with Robert's departure. And this is the time when we need to know of God's presence. Could you spare the time to join a monthly prayer for our church? You could let your group leader know of this.
  - ✚ Many in our community are troubled with the uncertainty of Brexit. Do you know anyone this might affect either because of their nationality or the nature of their job? You could let them know that they are been prayed for and spend time praying for them and showing them that God is with them.
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## **CLOSING PRAYER**

In closing, use the following prayer as a meditation. Read it out loud as a group and then spend a few minutes silently repeating it to yourself:

All we need, good Lord, is you yourself;  
Not words about you, but your very presence.  
In the silence.  
In the stillness.  
Come, Lord, Come.

[Richard Harries]

Close with the words of the Grace.