

## Immanuel, God is with us

Today, we lit the fourth of our Advent Candles as we remember Mary, the mother of Jesus. I am sure we have heard over and over again of her faithfulness, humility and steadfastness as she listened to word of the Angels and supported by Joseph, she accepted the unenviable task of been pregnant without a husband in a society where this is a no-no. I am sure we could learn much from her life of obedience and humility.

Nevertheless, this morning I want us to spend time and reflect together on the word Immanuel. As we know, Immanuel means God is with us, this word occurs only thrice in the Bible. Two of which are in the Book of Prophet Isaiah, which is from which we had our reading today and the other is from our Gospel reading from Mathew.

Immanuel, God is with us, often at this time of the year, we say this word or sing it without reflecting on what it really means. So now, can I implore you to take just a moment to reflect on what Immanuel mean to you? (Pause)

Reflecting on this might be easier for some of us than others.

For many of Immanuel brings to mind the image of the helpless, vulnerable baby in the manger especially since we sing songs with this word at Christmas more than any other time of the year.

However, Immanuel means more than just a baby, as the Bible clearly states that the Baby is a sign.

This morning, I want to help us unpack what the word means in the different circumstances that it was used in the Bible. I will be doing this through a series of questions.

1. What did Immanuel meant to Isaiah?
2. What did it meant to Matthew?
3. What did it meant to Mary and Joseph?
4. What should it mean to us?

What did Immanuel meant to Isaiah?

So let's deal with the first question first all: what did Immanuel meant to Isaiah? To answer this question, we need to understand the context of the event that led to the prophesy that 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 over Judah, was a king many would say was wicked and evil. He was a king that sacrificed his own children to idols all in the name of knowing what the future holds for him. His faith was not in 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 “superpowers” in the region at the time. Ahaz knew his army could not defeat the, same way the King that reigning over Israel and other neighboring kings knew they could only defeat the Assyrians if they all formed an alliance and join their armies.

With this in mind, the King of Israel and the King of Syria at the time, 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 unbelief, the Lord promised to deliver his people. The sign that the promise will be fulfilled will be the birth of a child who is to be called Immanuel. So what did Immanuel meant to Isaiah?

To Isaiah, Immanuel meant that *in the midst of all the trials, the tribulations and pressure that the nation of Judah faced, even though their King betrayed them, even though their King 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 it meant to Matthew?

Someone once used this illustration. Imagine an artist drawing a picture of a winter twilight, the trees within the picture were heavily laden with snow, and there was a dreary, a dark house in the background that looked lonely and desolate. Right there, in the midst of the storm, all that could be seen was a dark black house shadowed with the silhouette of these trees. It was a sad picture, but then with a quick stroke - just one quick stroke - with a yellow crayon, the artist simply put in a streak of light coming from the window. The effect, was

transforming, it was magical, because the entire scene was 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 have 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 have 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 it 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 is pregnant with child from another source? Of course not, they would have been filled with trepidation, fear and anxiety. Each would be asking themselves, Lord, why me? What have I done to deserve this? It's no wonder the Bible says 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 sick bed surrounded by friends and family, was reported to have suddenly opened his eyes and exclaimed for the very last time, upon his deathbed, 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 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 a 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 either we acknowledge Him or not. In good times as well as 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.

You might be wavering in your faith, well you are not alone. You might be saying to yourself, God why did you allow this to happen? You might think God has forgotten you or the promises He made. Let me reassure you that God does not forget. He is a God that honors His words even more than His name. If he says He is with us, then surely we need to trust Him and like Mary hold on to this promise. I am sure at the end, all will be well.