

December 21, 2025

Fourth Sunday in Advent

“God With Us”

Matthew 1:18-25

Isaiah's prophecy of Jesus' virgin birth more than 700 years before it happened is, like many prophecies, rather clear in the immediate context but ambivalent as to what it points to in the future. Isaiah's words to Ahaz, king of Judah, here designate an amount of time passing—in the time it takes for a virgin to marry, conceive, carry and bear a child and then the child grows enough to know how to eat but not quite enough to make basic moral decisions—in that period of time Assyria will rise to power and conquer Judah's present enemies, Israel and Syria. Yet the prophecy goes further: *“and shall call his name Immanuel.”*

To name the child is irrelevant to the marking of time. This name the virgin shall call the child means “God with us” and, of course, points forward to the coming of Messiah. That name is bigger than the present context. In the present context “God with us” could only mean judgment. Ahaz was an idolatrous king. Assyria is God's means of Israel's punishment for her continued idolatry. “God with us” is not a good thing if you're a rebellious and unholy people.

But the prophecy points forward to the child born centuries later in Bethlehem. And within our Old Testament and Gospel lessons there is this progression that takes place that is kind of amazing and very comforting. You'll have to bear with me here, and you might want to have the back of your bulletin handy to reference.

It kind of begins with an oddity. When the angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in the dream directing him to go ahead and take Mary as his wife, he tells him to name the child Jesus. But wait a minute! What name does the prophecy say to use? Immanuel! He is supposed to be named “God with us”. And that makes perfect sense because this child is true God now with us in our humanity. So why the switch?

I think it might be because “God with us” has been a problem since sin entered the world back in Eden. Remember, God used to walk with humanity in that garden paradise but when our sin entered the picture we were banished from God's presence. Later God sought to dwell amongst His people Israel in the tabernacle and then the temple, but it was always a tenuous affair, separated from the Holy of Holies where God was with the Ark of the Covenant, always requiring ceremonial purity and sacrifices to get anywhere near Him. Except for one priest on one day of the year, to enter directly into God's presence meant death!

What was necessary to change this state of affairs? Ah, that's where the second name comes in: Jesus. That name means “God saves” or “Savior”. To experience “God with us” we needed to be saved from that which keeps us apart from God, namely, our sins. The angel says, *“She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”*

In that statement you see the progression happening. In Isaiah's prophecy Immanuel, God with us, is among a rebellious and idolatrous people who stand opposed to Him; they are under His judgment, they are by their own choice not His people.

But in the promise of Jesus, “God Saves,” God is making a people to be called “His people,” those who are saved from their sins; a people for which the barrier between God and humanity stands torn asunder...you know, like that curtain to the Holy of Holies in the temple was torn asunder when Christ later died for our sins. Jesus, Savior, salvation, must come before God with us can be a thing.

But there's this cool thing that happens in our Gospel lesson that you probably just zipped right past. The angel says: "*All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet...*" but then he goes on to misquote the prophecy. And you've got to lose your western culture mindset that tells you quotations must always be exact and precise or you're doing it wrong. In the semitic view in Holy Scripture quotations are frequently altered for the purposes of making a point.

In the prophecy it is the virgin, she, singular, who names the child "Immanuel," God with us. But the angel quotes the prophecy this way: "*Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel.*" The angel of the Lord has switched the one calling the Messiah "Immanuel" from a singular woman to a plural people! And where to we find this plural people in the grammar? Who is the antecedent of "they"?

Back up a bit and there they are: "*He will save his people from their sins*!" It's the sinners! The ones who, by grace through the blessing of this child, stand saved from their sins. We who should fear the divine, holy presence of God near us, now, in Christ, are the ones who gladly declare it: God is with us!

And I do not want you to receive this as just some neat little grammatical trick of the text. This is a profound shift that takes place that should bring you great comfort in those times you look at yourself and think you're in the place of King Ahaz.

Maybe it's some horrendous sin that makes you feel separated from God. Or maybe it's just a lethargic faith or an unloving outlook on the world that has you feeling you are not His person. Whatever, you get it in your head that you've got to change something; end the sinning, improve the faith, increase the love, in order to get yourself right for the presence of God.

Such thinking is poison. It makes one fear "God with us" because we think we're under His wrath and, like Ahaz, we don't really want to deal with Him. It can make us avoid prayer and worship. It robs us of the joy of living under His reign. Taken to the extreme it can destroy our faith and salvation not because God is unwilling to save, but because we fearfully and resentfully turn our back on Immanuel; God with us.

It is especially in these times that we need to see Jesus for what Jesus means. Yes, your sin is bad, your faith is weak and your love is lacking. What of it? God saves! Jesus is Savior; saving you from that which you lack before God in your brokenness. God saves! Your sins are not barring you from God's presence. God with you is not condemnation because God Saves is reconciliation.

Jesus has made you His people by saving you from your sins. You are the ones who declare "Immanuel: God with us" as your greatest good, greatest joy.

Especially in this season of Advent we look forward to and focus on Christ's second advent on earth when He returns, the dead are raised, and His people are gathered into His glory forever. Amid all the other, lesser things you have going on in your life and maybe especially in the midst of the afflictions, pains and struggles of a fallen world, take comfort that Immanuel, "God with us" was the original design and Immanuel, "God with us" is the ultimate goal.

Especially in those times when you may feel separated from God, remember Immanuel "God with us" in your reality, because Jesus, "God saves" is a person, a brother, a Savior who has made Immanuel "God with us" a reality—more than that, a reality your sin and even your death, cannot change.

"*You shall call His name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*" The prophecy, the angel's promise, the restoration of "God with us" now stands accomplished, for you. Amen.