



## Matthew 1:20-23

Advent 4, Dec. 21, 2025

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***But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: <sup>23</sup> "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us).***

There are some things in life that just don't belong together. When you were in high school, maybe at some point you thought two people that were dating just made an odd couple. You just couldn't see it. "They don't fit together very well!" Or when Brett Favre signed with the Vikings—I remember seeing #4 Favre jerseys that were split down the middle, half Packers/half Vikings—that's just not right! Those things aren't supposed to go together!

In our antiphon this morning we have something similar going on. We have in our antiphon a name, a very special name. It's a name for God, a name for Jesus. It's a name we've been singing throughout this Advent season: "Immanuel." It's a name we're extremely familiar with, the name of the two high schools and several churches within our fellowship. *Clearly*, it's a very important name, and yet the word only appears three times in the Bible. Two of those times are found in our readings for today.

And it's an odd word. You see, "Immanuel" is a Hebrew word. "Immanu-" means "with us," and "-El" means "God." And that is an exceedingly odd pair. "God with... us"? How could *that* pairing make sense when He is holy and we are sinners? When He is eternal and we are mortal? When He is Life and we are death? When He is Light and we are darkness? This doesn't make sense in the slightest! "God" and "Us"—those two things just should not go together at all. And yet in our O Antiphon, we address Jesus as just that: "Immanuel"—"God with us."

***"O Immanuel, our King and our Lord,  
The Anointed for the nations and their Savior:  
Come and save us, O Lord our God."***

Our Old Testament reading from Isaiah and our sermon text from Matthew are the two *main* texts which use this name, "Immanuel." And there are a number of parallels between the accounts. The account in Isaiah is addressed to King Ahaz of Judah, and our sermon text is addressed to Joseph, the betrothed husband of Mary. And in *some* ways, these two men are very similar.

In both accounts, the Holy Spirit emphasizes that these two men were of the House of David. And they were! In fact, Joseph was descended *from* King Ahaz, seventeen generations removed. Both of these sons of David received messages from the Lord: Ahaz through Isaiah the prophet, Joseph through an angelic vision.

*Both* of them were afraid and troubled by something. Ahaz was afraid because he had heard that Syria and Israel had made an alliance against him. Their plan was to defeat him, kill him, and place someone else on the throne in Jerusalem as a puppet king. *Joseph* was troubled and afraid because the woman he was about to marry was pregnant! And it wasn't his baby.

To *both* of these men, God's message was the same, "Do not be afraid..." To Ahaz, the message was, "Do not be afraid of Syria!" ***"It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass."*** (Isaiah 7:7) To Joseph, the message was, ***"Do not fear to take Mary as your wife."*** And *this* is where the similarities between Ahaz and Joseph end, because here we find out that they are as different as two people can be.

When God sends this message to Ahaz, "Do not be afraid..." He offers Ahaz a sign to prove that what He was saying was trustworthy. And Ahaz responds, ***"I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test."*** (Isaiah 7:12) Now, that might *sound* like a good and pious answer, and it *was* meant to sound that way, but it was really just a sham. Ahaz was trying to fake faith and trying to fake it before God. You see, it's one thing to *demand* a sign from God—that's not very wise—but if God *offers* to give you a sign and you refuse it—that's pretty dumb! The reason Ahaz didn't want a sign from God was that he wasn't interested in the deliverance God was promising. He had already decided to ask *Assyria* to defeat Israel and Syria for him. He wanted that unbridled show of might and power rather than whatever means of saving God would have in mind.

Joseph was very different. In the verses right before our text, Joseph is described as ***"a just man."*** (Matthew 1:19) That means that he was a believer! He was just, which means he had been justified by faith! *His* faith was no sham. And you can see that in his actions. He believes the word of promise that God gives to him, and he does just as God says. He takes Mary as his wife, and he cares for her and this holy Child, because he believes this child is "Immanuel."

Ahaz did *not* believe that. He refuses to request a sign, and Isaiah gives him a sign anyway. ***"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."*** (Isaiah 7:14) He probably didn't understand what Isaiah was talking about here, and he certainly would never see it take place. This too would seem to be a strange thing—that God would give as a sign to Ahaz something that wasn't going to happen for another 700 years! That would be like if I was giving you directions and said, "Ok, you're going to take your first right, and then stay on that road for 700 miles, and then you'll see a sign that says your destination was 650 miles back in the other direction." That's not the way signs usually work! But this was the sign given him.

*Because* Ahaz did not trust the Lord, he did not ask for a sign, even when offered. Therefore, the Lord gave him *this* sign—the sign of the Savior to come. And this was a sign which would have been *tremendously* assuring to Ahaz if he had faith. God had said to Ahaz, ***"If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all."*** (Isaiah 7:9) You see, God was trying to assure Ahaz that Israel and Syria would not be able to prevail against him. God was *promising* that this would not happen. They would not prevail against Judah, because God had promised, ***"The scepter shall not depart from Judah, Nor a lawgiver from between his feet, Until Shiloh comes; And to Him shall be the obedience of the people."*** (Genesis 49:10) Judah would continue on because the Savior was coming to them.

And so many of Ahaz's ancestors had known that. In the verses before our sermon text, we are given a genealogy of Jesus going back as far as Abraham, but of course His lineage stretches back much further even than that. It goes all the way back to Adam and Eve. And Adam and Eve received the promise of a descendant who would crush Satan's head, and they believed it. Abraham received a similar promise, as did Isaac, and Jacob, and David—and *they* believed the promise. And after many

centuries, finally came the Child that they had all been waiting for, that Isaiah had prophesied about and presented to Ahaz as the *greatest* of signs. But Ahaz missed it because he did not believe. And I can imagine him walking away after this encounter with Isaiah, laughing about that crazy prophet and his crazy non-sensical prophecy.

But this was the *greatest* of signs. Ahaz could not have asked for anything so high, so deep, so sure. God's *promise* to send a Savior was the *surest* thing in all of creation! And when we see this same sign, the virgin being with Child, that is the surest sign to us as well that all of God's promises to us are also certain! His promises to forgive our sins and remember them no more, His promises of peace, of mercy that is new and fresh every morning, of a place with Him in paradise—we can see the certainty of these promises when we see *this* Child in the womb of the virgin.

Because those are some other things that don't belong together, a baby and a virgin's womb. That could not happen unless this was something totally new, totally different, something that really didn't belong here on earth. And that's what this was, God in human flesh. God become one of us. God coming down to fulfill every promise so that something even more *unbelievable* would be possible—that the phrase "God *with* us" could actually be good news *for* us.

Climb back up Jesus' family tree again, all the way back to the beginning—to those people to whom God had made that first promise of this Child. When Adam and Eve listened to Satan and ate the fruit of the tree that God had commanded them *not* to eat from, they tore themselves apart from God and united themselves together with Satan. Because when confronted with the choice between God's Word and Satan's lies, they chose the latter. Suddenly separated from God due to their sin, we can see how terrifying it was once they realized God was with them. They heard God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they covered up, and they hid; and when caught, they started the blame game. They realized God was *with* them and they would do anything to get *away* from God.

And the apple hasn't fallen far from the tree. We're just like Adam and Eve, often choosing Satan's lies in preference to God's Word. We're even like *Ahaz*, often treating God's promises as not really worth our time and certainly not as attractive as our own solutions. And that is why this name, Immanuel, "God with us" should *really* be terrifying news to hear.

But it is *good* news that God would be with us. Notice exactly what the angel said to Joseph, because it's different than what Isaiah said to Ahaz. "***She will bear a son, and you shall call his name...***" Immanuel? No! "***Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.***" Then, the Holy Spirit tells us that this birth *is* the fulfillment of that Isaiah prophecy, but the name given now is "Jesus." Jesus is a name that means "Jehovah saves." And there He was, Jehovah in human form, because that was what it would take for Him to bridge the divide between us and God. That's what it would take for Him to remove our sins. That's what it would take for Him to fulfill God's promises.

*All* that should be "*with us*" is the pain and sorrow and suffering of this life, and then hereafter the eternal darkness and despair of the damned. And yet God has worked this great and mighty wonder by sending Immanuel—God Himself being with us. And when God was with us, walking this earth, that culminated with two more things that did not belong together—Jesus and a cross.

In nearly every way imaginable, the cross was no place for the sinless God. It was a method of *human* judgment—and who were they to judge *Him*? Its nails and wood had no power to hold the Almighty One, and the mocking jeers of the crowd were totally out-of-place when thrown in the face of this Man so perfectly kind, this God so entirely gracious. But *this* is how God *chose* to be with us.

For on that day, the Son of God was not the powerful one, He was the humble Lamb who gave up His power, abandoning any effort to escape. On that day, He was not there as the Creator, but as the creation suffering creation's fate. On that day, He was not there as the all-knowing one, but as He who suffered wondering why His Father had abandoned Him. On that day, He was not there as sinless God, but as the sinner, as the one filled to the brim with the sins of the world. On that day, He was the one for whom the cross had been made, He was there as the one whom God cursed.

And on that tree, we see then what this name "Immanuel" really means. We see the God who came to be with *us*, to meet with us sinners by taking our sins upon Himself. In Him, we see that "God with us," is the very best news of all.

And even though He ascended into heaven, He is still with you. After all, He made you a promise. ***"I am with you always."*** (Matthew 28:20) He is with you in His Word, even when only ***"two or three are gathered in my name."*** (Matthew 18:20) He is with you in His Supper, where bread and wine really and truly are His body and blood, the same flesh that He took on when He came to earth. He is with you to forgive you, with you to bless you, with you to comfort you. He is with you because He came to be *one* of you. He is with you now, and He will be with you forever, for He says, ***"I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also."*** (John 14:3)

Because God came to be *with* us, because of the *way* in which He chose to be with us—suddenly these two things, "God" and "us," are not so out of place together. For since our sins have been forgiven, our mortality exchanged for immortality, our death defeated, our darkness eliminated—we will join the Holy One, immortal and everlasting God, the one who is Life and Light. Because *He* came to be with us, now *we* get to go to be with Him. And so, now we can pray to Him with confidence:

***"O Immanuel, our King and our Lord,  
The Anointed for the nations and their Savior:  
Come and save us, O Lord our God."*** Amen.

***"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."*** (Philippians 4:7) Amen.