

December 24, 2023

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Advent

Christmas Eve service

“And He will be Called... Emmanuel.”

Isaiah 7:14

**Intro:**

Over the Advent season we have been looking at some of the names that had been given to the Messiah before He was given the name of Jesus. Most of those names come from Isaiah’s prophecies and are gathered together for us in the song O Come, O Come Emmanuel. We have looked at what those names would have meant, and how they would have been understood, in the original context as well as how we can understand them in our context today.

Tonight, the name we are looking at gets to do double duty. Today is the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Advent, as well as Christmas Eve, and the name we are looking at fits well to both of these moments in our celebration of Christmas.

The name given to Jesus that we are looking at today is Emmanuel, which means “God is with us”.

Isaiah 7:14 gives us the original pronouncement, and Matthew later borrows from Isaiah 7 to make clear that those words applied to Jesus.

**Then:**

In the time that Isaiah was giving these words to King Ahaz of Judah, there was great fear of war because the people of Judah were under threat of attack from both Syria and Israel. This context is laid out in the beginning of chapter 7. Fear grips the people, and especially the court of the king, because of the rumour of those two nations conspiring against them. But their plans will not come to fruition. God sends a message of hope to Ahaz through Isaiah. It was a future hope that even though the kings of Syria and Israel seem powerful now, they are

weak and will themselves be overrun by another nation. It turns out, that nation was Assyria.

In spite of this reassurance from God, Ahaz was still frightened and tried to find allies in other nations, such as Egypt, to protect Judah instead of trusting in God. Into this lack of trust Isaiah comes again. This time it is with an invitation to the king to put God's faithfulness to the test. God tells Ahaz to ask him for a sign – as difficult as he wants it to be, that will prove God's continued presence with the people of Judah. But Ahaz declines the offer. In a show of false piety, which was really just covering up a lack of faith, Ahaz retorts that one should not put God to the test. God responds by offering a sign anyways. Not one that had been expected, but one that was needed. A child will be born to a virgin, and that child will herald the day when deliverance from oppression will begin. And his name will be Emmanuel – God with us.

This word of hopeful promise tells Ahaz (who subsequently still refuses to rely on God) and the Jewish people that God is still present among those of His people who remain faithful to Him. The question is not whether God's presence is with them, but whether His people will retain their faith in Him. Assyria did conquer Syria and Israel, and sadly, the people of Judah did not hold to their faith in God and so they were also overwhelmed by the flowing tide that was the Assyrian nation.

**Now:**

But the promise of God's presence does not end in Isaiah's prophecies. It also comes in the Matthew's Gospel. That same promise of God being with us changes from being specific to Judah, to universal. God's presence is now available for all people to know and experience. Jesus came so that people could know God through Him. Jesus is the one who has seen God, and is God, and so if humanity knows Jesus, then they will also know God.

And this is what we are thankful for at Christmas when we celebrate the birth of Jesus. It is more than just that a baby was born. It is more than just that this baby

was the Messiah and walked and talked and lived as a human being for a period of time, as important and wonderful as that is. It is to the cross of and the empty tomb of Easter that we really look at Christmas. It is there that the work of restoring people to relationship with God is completed. It is through Jesus' death and resurrection that people can know again the fullness of God's presence in their lives. And this is the good news!

However, there is one slight catch. Just as in Isaiah's day, where God promised his presence to those who remain faithful, our experience of God's presence today is also dependant upon our choosing to place our faith in Him. He is present in the world, acting through the Holy Spirit, but he is only "with" those who commit their lives to following Him, who put their faith in Him.

### **Conclusion:**

As you look past all the presents and the food and the lights and tinsel in how we celebrate Christmas today, and see the manger scene with Jesus at the center, take a moment to ask yourself if the thing you are missing in your life is the very presence of God that Jesus' birth brings. This gift is there, waiting for you to claim. If you have not yet placed your faith in Jesus, then this might be the time that God invites you to do so and to know Him and to have him with you. Take a moment this season to allow God to be present with you.

If you have already made that decision, allow this season to remind you that God is still with you, in spite of all any and all of the challenges that life can throw at you. This is a season of hope and promise that there has been a savior born into this world, and that He is still invested in the people he came to reconnect with God.

Let's pray.