

IMMANUEL: GOD WITH US

Matthew 1:18-25
Key verse 22-23

United Chicago CWS
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“All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means ‘God with us’).”

Merry Christmas! I was invited to share with you the beautiful story of Immanuel, a name that means, “God with us.” It is the birth story of Jesus, *“Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness (Php 2:6-7).”* See, Jesus wasn’t always a baby in a manger. When God created the world, he did so through his Word, and this Word is Jesus. John tells us, *“Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made (Jn 1:3).”* The story of Immanuel is the story of this Word incarnating himself in order to be with us: *“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us (Jn 1:14).”* The story of Immanuel is the story of the incarnation: Jesus came to make his dwelling among us.

Why is this such a big deal? Much like the world was ignorant of Jesus’ coming on that silent night long ago, man’s life today seems to have little to do with the reality of God being with us. If we need an item, Amazon has it. If we need an answer, Google has it. If we need a relationship or affirmation, we have social media. If we are sick, we go to a doctor. We look to social movements and government to resolve the big issues. And that is just the problem: in efforts to create a world and society without God, we have been cut off from reality, left to our own devices, and deceived, as all that we have and do cannot really bring the reality we hope for. They all fall short.

But God wants to restore creation, to open our eyes and bring us back into reality and in relationship with him: to work together, play together and recreate the world! So what happens when God makes his dwelling with us? This evening I want to share with you three stories that answer just that question. I don’t know where each of you are in terms of relationship with God, but I know he has something to say to you today. What kind of a story is Immanuel?

First, Immanuel is a story of interruption. When we think of “God with us,” we usually want it to mean God altering my reality on my terms. God indeed interrupts our fantasy world, but not in the way we might imagine. Let’s see through the story of Jesus’ birth. Verse 18. *“This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.”* You can imagine Joseph’s reaction. Husbands: what would you do? Look at verse 19. *“Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.”* This was quite a struggle for Joseph. He obviously could not marry a woman who was unfaithful. But rather than lashing out at her, he chose to bear the pain and protect Mary, because he loved her. There was no way he could truly understand why this happened, or why Mary did this, or what people would say... but he did his best to love God and to love others. The truly righteous man doesn’t have all the answers. Life is full of perplexing, complicated and confusing issues. Joseph’s life was suddenly a mess, but he made the best decision he could, putting God and others first. Then he could sleep well that night.

“But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit (20).’” Wow! What a dream! God made it clear that Joseph was free to take Mary, whom he loved, as his wife, with no fear of displeasing God, because this was God’s plan to enter into our world as the Son. Not only so, this was God’s special blessing and privilege for Joseph and Mary. Verse 21 reads, *“She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”* What an amazing revelation to Joseph! What a great hope God has in him to raise his own Son, the Savior of the world!

“When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ but he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus (24-25).” It was not an easy decision. Very few people (if any) would know the truth about their family. It would invite misunderstanding, rumors, and hardship. And these weren’t privileged, wealthy people; Joseph was a blue collar worker; their nation was oppressed by Rome. “Immanuel: God with us was” quite an interruption! They went from preparing their wedding day to nearly divorcing, to bearing the Son of God at the cost of their reputations. But Joseph and Mary rose to the challenge. Their obedience provided the means for the Savior to come, reshaping the history of the world.

As we read through the stories in the Bible we find this theme of interruption repeated: God takes risks, investing in powerless people, interrupting in their lives and

through them altering the course of human history, all in an effort to be with us: Think of Noah and family, alone on the ark, whom God remembered. Think of Abraham, old and without child, through whom God established a tribe and people! Or Moses, a murderer and exile, through whom God delivered his people. Or David, who wasn't even counted by his own father Jesse, but God saw his heart, and chose him to be king. God was with each of them in their generation, working with them to advance his plan of redemption. In Jesus, Immanuel, God is still doing so today.

Second, *Immanuel is a story of intervention*. Why choose this way to interrupt the fantasy of the world, instead of a demonstration of supreme power? Let's look again at the angel's message to Joseph: "*She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.*" What are sins and why do we need saving from them? From God's point of view sin is more than individual subjective moral failures. Sin impacts all people and societies. For example, a 2012 report on human trafficking¹ found that over 1000 children are trapped in sex slavery every year in Ohio alone. Racism continues to plague our society. Movie stars, athletes, politicians and the wealthy continue to amass power and influence, while those whose daily work matters most – like teachers, police officers, and others – struggle to get by. Why is the world like this? In the early 20th century a British "...newspaper posed the question, 'What's Wrong with the World?' the Catholic thinker G. K. Chesterton reputedly wrote a brief letter in response: 'Dear Sirs: I am. Sincerely Yours, G. K. Chesterton.'²" It is sin in the heart of every person that spills out to the aberrations of evil in our world today. Sin is why our relationships are damaged, why we can't love one another properly. We justify our wicked desires by comparing to others, or drown our guilt and shame in distractions. We look to religion, education, money or personal discipline to save us. But sin makes us blind to our own condition, confident in our own ability and righteousness, and powerless to know the truth. Sin makes us slaves.

Immanuel is a story of intervention. An intervention is held for a person who can't help themselves. Jesus came to be with us, Immanuel, to intervene in our story – to save us from our sins. What does this look like? The best example may be Matthew, who wrote this gospel.

¹ <https://www.utoledo.edu/hhs/htsj/theproblem.html>

² Quoted from Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God* (New York, NY: Dutton, 2008), 46.

When we first meet Matthew, Jesus is already grown up and engaged in God's work of healing the sick, preaching the good news of the kingdom and calling disciples to follow him. Matthew is a tax collector, using his people's oppressed state as an opportunity to provide for himself. His regional boss bid on the rights to tax Judea for the empire, and hired Matthew and his coworkers to collect from people. Needless to say, this was offensive to Jews, and a gross injustice motivated by selfishness. Matthew was what was wrong with Matthew's world, squeezing widows and orphans so he could live in opulence. No one wanted to be near him. But Jesus came right up to him in his tax booth, intervening in Matthew's world, and simply said to him, "*Follow me (Mt 9:9).*" It meant, "Matthew, look what your life has become. I know you want more than this. I want to help you. I accept you as you are. All the misunderstanding and difficulty being with you will bring is worth it to me, because I want you to be with me and be my disciple. I love you and will help you become like me. I want you! Trust me. Come out of that tax booth, and follow me." That is exactly what Matthew did. Then Matthew threw a party for Jesus, inviting all his friends: sinners and tax collectors like him (Mt 9:10).

Intervening in Matthew's life was not easy for Jesus and his community of disciples. Immediately they were criticized by religious authorities of their time (Mt 9:11). There may have been hard feelings between Matthew, who had collected taxes at the lakeshore, and the other disciples, particularly the four fisherman: Peter, Andrew, James and John, who had to pay taxes to him. But this is why Jesus came to be with us as Immanuel. Jesus said, thinking of Matthew and the other public sinners: "*It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick...I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners (Mt 9:12-13).*" By responding to Jesus' call, Jesus' intervention in his life, Matthew was saved from his sins, and he became a different person. Rather than a burden to society, he has impacted generations of people through writing this gospel.

"Jesus... will save his people from their sins (21)." Jesus does not to cover up our sin, but takes it away by nailing it to the cross (Col 2:14). It was Jesus' body that hung on that cross; it was his blood that was shed in our place, so that forgiveness of sin be granted to us. We become Jesus' people when we accept Jesus' invitation like Matthew and follow Jesus. Jesus wants to intervene in our lives today. He came to save us from our sins, and invite us into a glorious new life with him. And that brings me to my last point.

Third, Immanuel is a story of invitation. Let's read our key verse again for today. "*All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means 'God with us').*" (22-23) This prophecy was fulfilled 2000 years ago when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea to the poor but eager Joseph and Mary. So he is already here, with

his people always. Since we are so distracted by the shiny things of this world, we often do not notice him. So, as Immanuel, he is still interrupting and intervening today, but it begins from hearing his invitation. Let me share one last story, a story of how Immanuel: God with us, is a story of invitation.

When I came to UIC as a freshman, I had long hair, a \$300 per week drug habit, and lived a heavy metal lifestyle. Since I wanted to make money as an electrical engineer, I decided to give up drugs, move back home from my girlfriend's and study hard. But I could not. For the first time I began to see the world as it really is. The very actions I thought defined my freedom became the chains that held me fast. Like Matthew in his tax booth, I was stuck. At that time God interrupted the narrative of my life. Jesus intervened, and invited me into his story through a missionary who asked me if I wanted to study the Bible. God was with me for two years through shepherds who bore with me, while I struggled to live differently. I had no power to save myself. But in 1997 I heard Jesus' words, *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (Jn 14:6)."* It was Jesus' invitation: I am the way. Follow me! I accepted his invitation, and immediately "my chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth and followed thee!" That was 22 years ago. Since that time, he has been forming me into his image, opening my eyes to God's reign and rule, and purpose, and making me a blessing. I've often said, "Following Jesus can be exciting and scary, but never boring." He granted me a wonderful wife, Amy, and four sons. After 8 years as an engineer, he called me to serve him full time as a shepherd for his people. I've been blessed to share his invitation with students, neighbors and friends, sometimes being his hands and feet to intervene and interrupt their lives, and see their lives transformed as Jesus, Immanuel, dwells with them too. He has invited me to work with him as he re-creates the world, starting from my family and community. What a privilege!

Jesus is Immanuel, God with us. He wants to interrupt your life with his call and purpose, to intervene and save you from your sins, and invite you to life with him. He says: *"Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest (Mt 11:28)."* He says, *"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me (Rev 3:20)."* What will your story be?