

## Fourth Sunday of Advent – 2007

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast  
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church  
Columbus, Ohio  
December 23, 2007*

### **Matthew 1:18-25**

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ happened. His mother Mary had been promised in marriage to Joseph. But before they were together, she was found to be with child — by the Holy Spirit! Her husband Joseph, a righteous man who was unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly. He had made up his mind to do this when [ah!] an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. “Joseph, son of David,” the angel said, “don’t be afraid to take Mary – your wife – into your home, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to call his name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

All this happened to fulfill what the Lord had said by the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and bear a son, and they will call his name Immanuel” (which means God with us).

When Joseph woke from his sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home. But he was not intimate with her until she had borne a son. And he called his name Jesus.

### **Sermon**

*Immanuel*; God with us.

I wonder if Joseph figured that out. It wasn’t part of what the angel told him. I wonder if he figured it out on his own. After all, he had a lot on his mind. His heart was heavy with sadness and with responsibility. The marriage was coming apart, coming apart before he and Mary had even been together. How could he be husband to a woman who had betrayed him? Yet how could he toss her aside, vulnerable and confused as she was? Joseph’s mind was reeling, and his heart was aching. I wonder if he heard half of what the angel said. I wonder if he figured out the *Immanuel* conclusion.

I kind of doubt it. At least, I doubt that Joseph would have drawn the conclusion we accept. Not just that God was present and at work in Jesus, but that God was — and is — Jesus. Yet even the weaker conclusion about God being present and at work in Jesus, with enough power to save, with enough power to end Israel’s lingering exile, even that modest conclusion might have been tough for Joseph to draw.

**Let me restate the situation briefly.** Israel’s exile was not over — not really, not yet. After doing time in Babylon, some Israelites had returned. They made their home among a mixed bag of people mostly in and around Jerusalem. There they scratched out a meager existence. Somehow they managed to rebuild the city’s wall. (A city is not a city without a wall, not a city at all.) They even managed to construct a new temple. Building a temple was like planting a flag on captured territory. It was a way of saying, “We are here!” Or, in this case, “We reclaim this ground for the LORD!”

But no pillar of cloud and fire had led them back from Babylon to Jerusalem. And when the temple was built, though it was only a dim shadow of Solomon’s Temple, the worst part was this: no cloud of glory had filled the temple. Not this time. The people had come back; apparently God had not. Not that the people were utterly abandoned or forsaken. No. But God was not present now in the way he had been present before. So Israel was still in exile, still paying the price for their sins.

What conclusion, then, might Joseph have drawn from the angel-dream? An end to exile? Israel saved from their sins? Maybe. God present and at work to save his people? Through Jesus? Hmm . . . God inhabiting this child? God living in skin? Hardly! Yet the prophet had said, *Immanuel*; God with us.

**What does it mean though, *Immanuel*?** For Israel it certainly meant the end of exile at last. Though, as we saw last week, the exile did not end in the expected way. There was no anti-Roman insurrection with Messiah leading the way. There was no declaration of independence. There was no forcible humiliation of Israel's enemies. No fire to incinerate every rebel against God. No earthquake to shake human arrogance down to its foundations. No whirlwind to wipe clean the accretions of blood and bones.

Instead there would be an infant. Then a child. Then a man. Then a victim. Then a corpse.

God would be in this infant. God would be this infant, this man, this corpse. And *Immanuel*; God with us, would entail surprise after surprise. Changing water into wine. Feasting instead of fasting. Winning by losing. Living by dying. Overcoming hatred with love, only to be betrayed by a kiss. But that is how God chose to work. That is how God chose to be present.

*Immanuel* means God is with his people in Jesus. For Israel that was all about old promises and pains. And every bit of all that came together in Jesus. He kept the promises. He bore the pain. In him God was uniquely and forever with Israel. Because Jesus is God, and Jesus is Israel, God's chosen One. So the birth of this child is the critical instalment in the "God and Israel" story.

And because all the promises have their *yes* in Jesus, he is God with us. Through Jesus light shines from Israel to all nations, to all peoples. By that light we see. At last we see! We see where we are. We see where we have been. And we see the way home, so that God will be with us and we will be with God forever.

**That's fine. That's forever. What about now? Jesus left. Is God with us?** The *Immanuel* promise is all about the child. *Immanuel* means God with his people in the flesh and blood of this infant, in the flesh and blood of this child, of this man. What happens, though, when the flesh and blood is gone? In flesh and blood Jesus is now not here, but at the right hand of God. That sounds more like "God with God" than "God with us." Now what?

Jesus promised not to leave us, but to come back to us. ("I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you." – cp. John 14:18) He promised to come back to us, and he does. God is with us. By the Holy Spirit — the same Spirit that came upon Mary. The Holy Spirit is *Immanuel*.

You can't see the Holy Spirit. You can't touch or taste the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is like the wind. We don't see where the wind begins. We don't see where the wind ends. But the wind's effects are evident. (All morning the wind has been blowing, sending leaves this way and that, bending branches.) The Spirit is with us. The Spirit is in us. The Spirit is around us. Like the wind. Like the air we breathe. The Holy Spirit is God with us, God with the church, leading us to life.

Here are some more things I want to say, things I don't have all worked out, not yet. Some of it is theology. Some of it is hunches. Some of it is analogy. Some of it is personal experience.

My theology tells me that the Holy Spirit is given to the church, that the Holy Spirit leads and guides the church. That's what my theology tells me. But experience and hunches tell me that the Holy Spirit leads the church by leading individuals. One part or another of the body is in the wind before the whole body is. We do well in the church to pay attention to what those parts of the body are experiencing. We do well to pay attention to how those parts of the body are being moved. Because the Spirit leads the church by leading individuals. What's more, an analogy tells me that we need to make some adjustments before any of us will be moved by the Holy Spirit.

Have you ever noticed that when you ride a bike there's always a headwind? It's not that way when you run. When you run, the wind is changeable. Run one way, and the wind is in your face, pushing against you. Run another way, and the wind bumps you sideways and tries to force you off the track you intend to follow. Run still another way, however, and the wind is behind you, going with you. Usually it's subtle, so subtle that you can hardly feel it. But once in a while . . .

Two weeks ago I went for a run on a blustery day. For the first leg of my run I was heading west, straight into a cold, brisk wind. I almost froze my face off. And I had to fight the wind the whole way.

Then I turned a corner. Now the wind was coming at me sideways, and I continued to struggle with it. But then I turned one more corner and started heading east. Now I was going with the wind. And the wind, the wind began to push me, really push me. I felt like I had a hand in my back, pushing me forward. At times it pushed me with such force that it almost lifted me up. It was amazing!

My hunch? We need to turn and to turn and to turn and to turn again, until we are no longer colliding with the Spirit, whether head first or sideways. We need to turn and to turn and to turn, until we are moving with the Spirit. When we do that, we just may feel the Spirit pushing us, even lifting us off the ground.

Here's a recent personal experience. About six weeks ago, I received a newsletter from the Metropolitan Council of Churches. Most of the time, I just take that newsletter out of the plastic sleeve it comes in and drop it into the recycle box. But this time I paged through it. That's when I noticed an announcement about an upcoming interfaith service to remember the homeless and formerly homeless who had died in Columbus during the last year. Now, I knew who would be at the that service: a bunch of "left-wing, wacko do-gooders." But something made me tear out that little notice from the newsletter and place it on my desktop. Something urged me to go to the service. I didn't write it on my calendar, but I kept noticing that slip of paper on my desk. And so I went, last Thursday evening, to Trinity Episcopal Church, just across 3<sup>rd</sup> Street from the State House.

I went expectantly. I went because I needed something and I hoped for something that would shift my holiday perspective. (My family will tell you that I'm usually a grump at Christmas time. I can find more to complain about at Christmas time than at any other time of the year.) I needed and I hoped for something to energize me or realign me. I guessed that the Holy Spirit had been prompting and prodding me for about six weeks with just that sort of thing in mind. But what I needed and hoped for didn't happen. I wasn't touched at all by what went on there. The salient feature of the service was the thickly-bearded man sitting in the pew in front of me and just to the left, who snored loudly through most of the service.

I left disappointed. I had thought that the Spirit had led me there. But by the time I left, that seemed unlikely. Only later on did it hit me. Perhaps the Spirit didn't intend to move me. Perhaps the Spirit only wanted me to see others who have been moved. Maybe they are a bunch of "left-wing, wackos," but at least they're doing something. They see a problem that's a blight on Columbus, and they're trying to do something about it. At least they're doing something! At least they're trying to line themselves up with the wind.

*Immanuel* means God with us. Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to blow us to places where God intends us to be. Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to blow us to places where God intends to be with us. So turn, turn, turn. Turn until you feel the wind on your back. Because the wind is *Immanuel*; God with us.