

Christmas Eve (Early) – 2024
IMMANUEL – GOD IS WITH US

Prayer

Jesus, we give you thanks for being Immanuel; help us to realize in just how many ways you are with us today.

AMEN

Context

In tonight's reading from the Old Testament, we meet Ahaz, one of the evil kings of the Judah – the Southern Kingdom – and the newly appointed prophet of God, Isaiah.

Ahaz – A bad King

The prophet had been sent to tell the king not to worry about his enemies to the North – Damascus (Syria) and Samaira (Israel – The Northern Kingdom) – because the Lord God would protect him. We see in verse 10 and 11 that God not only offered but **told** Ahaz to seek a sign from His to validate this promise of protection.

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Now typically, seeking a sign from God is not a good thing, because we believe with our ears and not with our eyes. Jesus healed many people and even raised the dead, but those who didn't have faith didn't believe that the signs were indeed validation that Jesus was who He said He was. In Luke we read the parable of Abraham and the rich man, which ends like this (16:29 – 31):

"Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' "No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' "He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

Indeed, Jesus provided us with the sign of Jonah (Luke 11:29-30):

When the crowds were increasing, [Jesus] began to say, "This generation is an evil generation. It seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the Son of Man be to this generation.

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Even though Ahaz was **told** to ask for a sign, He refused to do so (v 11). This is unbelief masquerading as piety. Instead of taking God at this word, he did the opposite, and reached out and asked Assyria, (modern day Iraq) for help in protecting the kingdom. Assyria provided protection and in fact invaded and conquered both Syria and the Northern Kingdom, but at the cost of Judah's political independence. Judah became a vassal of Assyria, not unlike the relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States. Trusting in his own judgement and ignoring God's counsel was the first reason Ahaz was an evil King.

But it didn't stop there. Faith followed politics and Ahaz led the people of Judah away from the worship of the one true God into the worship of the false gods of Assyria, primary Ashur. This was the second reason Ahaz was an evil King.

Even though he didn't want it, Ahaz was promised a sign, one that wasn't fulfilled until centuries later. We see in verse 13 and 14 the promised of the virgin birth of that we celebrate tomorrow; the birth of Jesus the Christ, who is also called by the title "Immanuel – God is with us."

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So, what does it mean when it says, “God is with us?”

He was **with us** during His Earthly ministry.

Jesus is fully human. Unlike some superhero, he didn’t enter the world as an adult, but was born just like you and I, as a baby. He grew up and most likely started working in the family business at an early age – most likely before he was 10 years old. The typical lifespan around that time was only about 35 years, so at the relatively old age of 30, Jesus retired and became an itinerant rabbi. His message wasn’t well received by the religious establishment and those leaders conspired with the occupying foreign powers to falsely accuse Him and put Jesus to death. Realize that things haven’t changed much; around the world today in Islamic theocracies, Christians are being charged with teaching blasphemy and being put to death for preaching the truth.

Unlike today’s martyrs, our Lord fulfilled the sign of Jonah, staying only three days in the tomb before taking up His life again to complete His Earthly ministry and then return to His Father in Heaven after 40 days.

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During those 33 or so years that Jesus lived among us, He was also fully God. He did not lose, but instead chose to selectively use His Divine powers. He was indeed **Omnipresent** – existing everywhere, as exemplified when he recognized Nathanael (John 1:48-49):

*Nathanael said to him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, **I saw you.**" Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"*

Our Lord was indeed **Omnipotent** – All Powerful. I'm sure you remember hearing about when Jesus healed people, raised the dead, and commanded both wind and waves.

He was indeed **Omniscient** – All knowing, as exemplified when He knew the thoughts of others (Matthew 9:3-5):

*And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, "This man is blaspheming." But Jesus, **knowing their thoughts**, said, "Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'?"*

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Finally, He was the **eternal** God, to quote the Athanasian Creed:

*That we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, God's Son, is both God and human, equally. He is God from the essence of the Father, **begotten before time**; and he is human from the essence of his mother, born in time; completely God, completely human, with a rational soul and human flesh; equal to the Father as regards divinity, less than the Father as regards humanity.*

But what about now, since His ascension? In what ways is Jesus **with us** today?

Jesus is **with us** as our Head – we are the members of His body as it says in Ephesians 1:22-23:

And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

We can see His reflection **in our fellow believers**.

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Since Jesus is the Word made flesh, as recorded by John (1:14):

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

He is **with us** in God's **word of revelation** to us – in the words of absolution – reminding us that our sins have been forgiven, as well in the words of scripture that are read, telling the story of Jesus and the promise of redemption from sin and restoration of relationship with our creator. We also have the preached word, God's message of both what He demands of us (the Law) as well as what He has done for us, since we cannot keep the Law (the Gospel).

Because we are Baptized, Jesus is with us through the comforter, the **indwelling Holy Spirit** that He promised to give to us at His ascension (John 14:26):

But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.

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Finally, Christ **with us** because He is truly present in, with, and under the **bread and wine when we celebrate the Lord's Supper**, as we do almost every Sunday and will do later this evening. We hear and believe the words of institution:

Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night when He was betrayed, took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to the disciples and said: "Take, eat; this is My body, which is given for you.

and

He took the cup after supper, and when He had given thanks, He gave it to them, saying: "Drink of it, all of you; this cup is the New Testament in My blood, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.

It's my prayer for you that during this coming year, you would indeed be reminded of the Christ Child whose birth we celebrate and find comfort, peace, and joy in and through the many ways in which God is both for us and **with us.** AMEN