

Well, Christmas 2017 has come and gone, and I suspect a lot of us are a bit worn out for the effort. It was a nice diversion though. That’s one of the great things about great traditions. No matter what is going on in the world, a great tradition like Christmas, transports us to another place and to another time. Celebrating the holiday provides a temporary escape from the harsher realities of life. Returning once again to the manger in the stable, gazing upon the shepherds, wise men, Joseph, Mary, and especially the baby Jesus, we were able to put the heroin epidemic, the growing concerns about a war with North Korea, and future terror attacks on the back burner. Even as Joseph and Mary went up to Bethlehem to be registered for Roman taxation, we were able to forget about how the changing tax code here is going to impact us. The Prince of Peace gave us peace—at least for a few hours.

Like Peter on the Mount of Transformation, some of us would like to freeze this moment in time, build shelters to dwell in so we can stay near the manger. We would like to feel this warm and fuzzy, this safe, this loved all the time. Unfortunately, that is not possible—at least not in this world. Besides that, our Christmas decorations would lose their special magic if we kept them up all the time.

But more important than this, the Biblical message is not and cannot be frozen. Jesus in the manger is only the beginning of the story not the end. The story moves on. Jesus grows up. He teaches and preaches and performs miracles. He is rejected, crucified, and resurrected. The story is dynamic and so is the story of our lives.

As we stand on the brink of the new year: 2018, there is a lot of uncertainty. What will happen in the war against drugs? Will there be war with North Korea and, if so, how many innocent people will have to die? Will we see a nuclear holocaust? Will cyber terrorists shut down our national electric grid, disrupt our banking system, or hack their way into the pentagon? And of a more personal nature: Will our jobs be secure? Will our medical tests come back negative or positive? Will our children and/or grandchildren stay out of trouble? Will someone close to us die?

The possibilities for catastrophe are endless and very frightening if we choose to dwell on them very long. **It’s a scary world out there. And, it’s getting scarier all the time.**

But, no matter what may happen good or bad, there is one special fact we can take home from Christmas, one fact we can count on throughout the whole new year and throughout the whole of our lives, and that one fact is His name: “Immanuel,” which means “God with us.” The whole message of Christmas can be summed up in that one phrase: “God with us.” The gift of Christmas is “God with us.” Matthew 1:23 reminds us: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.”

But what does it mean to say that God is with us? In what sense can we count on God being with us this coming year? First of all, when the Bible says that God is with us, **it means that God remembers us.** At first that may not seem all that important or significant, but it really is. The Christmas story is about God remembering His people in their time of need.

The Name Immanuel appears in two places in the Bible, in Isaiah and in Matthew. In Isaiah, the people of Judah are in a precarious position. Israel the Northern Kingdom and Syria had made an alliance and were threatening to invade Judah. When the people of Judah heard that Israel and Syria were working together against them, they were terrified and certain of defeat. The message Isaiah received from the Lord, however, was that Israel and Syria would not be able to carry out their threats. God had remembered Judah and would give a sign of his remembrance, and this was the sign: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel.” Indeed Israel and Syria were thwarted in their intentions to harm Judah. God intervened as promised.

In Matthew, the people of Judah were in trouble once again. Having been defeated and occupied by Rome, the people of Judah were oppressed and suffering heavy taxation. Luke 2:1-3 as it reads in the KJV puts it this way: *“And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.”*

Matthew is inspired to remember the prophecy of Isaiah. Once again God has remembered His people. Once again God is about to intervene. “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and

they will call him Immanuel—which means “God with us.” This time God sends His Son.

Perhaps you are in special need this morning? Certainly some of us will find ourselves in some sort of crisis at some point during the new year. It is possible that all of us will find ourselves in trouble together. Whatever is happening, we do not need to be afraid. The promise of Immanuel means that God will remember. **If we remember the Lord, the Lord will remember us. We will call His name: “Immanuel.”**

God with us means that God remembers us. **The second thing that Immanuel, God with us, means is that God actually comes to us.** At Christmas He came to us in Jesus, and now He comes to us in the person of the Holy Spirit. In John 14:15-18, Jesus says to His disciples: *“If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.”* Jesus continues the same thought in verses 25 - 27: *“All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”*

You will notice the ministries which Immanuel provides. In verse 16 He is identified as **Counselor**, the Spirit of truth. Have you ever felt lost in life, confused, not knowing which way to turn or what to do? If we reach out to Him in faith, Immanuel is our Counselor; He will guide us into all truth.

In verse 18 He is identified as **parent and constant companion**; Jesus says “I will not leave you as orphans.” Have you ever felt all alone, even in a crowd? Have you ever felt alone even in your most intimate relationships? Have you ever felt the loneliness of your mortality, realized that someday you are going to die and at that moment your dearest friends and best physicians will not be able to save you? Or have you ever considered the possibility of outliving all your loved ones.

I have often visited very elderly people who feel the isolation of that situation. Their loved ones and dearest friends on earth have preceded them in death and now they feel all alone. But if we set our sights higher, if we reach out to the Lord we will find Him reaching out to us. With His Spirit within us we will be able to say with the psalmist in psalm 27:10, *“When my father and mother forsake me then the Lord will take me up.”* Immanuel will not leave us as orphans, He will come to us.

In verse 26, Immanuel is identified as Counselor and **teacher**. Have you ever felt that you lacked wisdom or that you lacked a knowledge of God’s will? If you ask God, He will provide your teacher. Immanuel will remind you and teach you all the truth Jesus taught while He walked on earth. Immanuel will be your teacher.

In verse 27, Immanuel is identified as our source of **peace**. There are a significant number of people in our world today, and you may be one of them, who lack a moment’s peace. Their number one occupation and past time in life is to worry. They worry in the day time and find it hard to sleep at night. They worry about finances, about children and grandchildren, about war and famine. They worry about home invasions, drug traffickers, and terror attacks. They worry about the weather and whether or not there will be floods when this winter’s snow melts in the spring. They worry about their health, they worry about aging, and they worry about how to stay looking young. If you are a worrier I don’t need to give you things to worry about: You have lots of them!

But notice what Jesus says, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” Immanuel, when we entrust our entire lives--our past, present, and future-- to His care, is our peace. **God is with us. He will give us His peace if we will trust Him.**

Immanuel means that God remembers us and that God comes to us. **A third thing that Immanuel means is that God will give us victory.** He remembers us to save us. He comes to us to be with us for good not evil. He comes to bless us. The message of the angels to the shepherds assures us of this meaning of Emmanuel’s coming: Luke 2:10-11 say: *“But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”*

Paul asks in Romans 8:31, *“If God is for us, who can be against us?”* The intended answer to Paul’s rhetorical question is: “No one.” If God is on our side, we win. When God is with us through Christ and with us through the Holy Spirit we have victory over fear, victory over sin and victory even over death. We are meant to live in victory.

The problem for many of us, however, is that we don’t see as much victory in our lives as we think we should. Fear still torments us. Sin still defeats us on a regular basis, and thus our character is often less than Christian. We hope we will be saved but our assurance is lacking. Do you know what I think? I think God is with us but many of us fail to activate our faith. If you want victory, you’ve got to pray for it. If you want God’s help, you must sincerely and faithfully ask for it, believing that His help will be given. If you want victory over sin and the assurance of Eternal life, you must take time to abide in Christ and obey Him. In other words you must unwrap the gift God has given you.

Andy Rooney once said: “One of the most glorious messes in the world is the mess created in the living room on Christmas Day.” This was certainly true at our house again this year. And, in the midst of the mess, there always seems to be at least one present whose intended recipient is uncertain. Maybe Santa forgot to write a name on it or the tag got brushed off coming down the chimney!

But there is no uncertainty about the gift of Christ; everyone’s name is on the package that was delivered to the manger. Jesus is for you and Jesus is for me. But in order to receive Him you need to do two things. First, you have to believe it. You have to believe that this gift is for you. And, secondly, you have to unwrap your gift. Beloved, God’s gift is for you. Immanuel is for you! Believe that. Unwrap that. God remembers you. God will come to you. God will give you victory.

The Fourth Street Church of God

2001 Fourth Street
Altoona, PA 16601
942-1007/946-4110

Sermon for December 31, 2017

And They shall Call His Name “Immanuel”

Isaiah 7:10-14; Matthew 1:18-23

Jon R. Neely, Pastor

neelyjon@gmail.com
4thstcog.com