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St. John's Lutheran Church of Burlington
21 December 2025

Sermon on Matthew 1:23b

Worship Theme:

IMMINENT ARRIVAL OF EMMANUEL

“Emmanuel” means “God with us.” It was a special name given to Jesus already 700 years before he was born. Who is with us when Jesus is with us? God himself. God became a human being in a special way, becoming truly human but remaining God. God is still with us. We encounter him in a special way when we gather with two or three others in worship. He is so near to us that the thrill of anticipation is almost unbearable. Let it wash over you as you celebrate Christmas this week.

Sermon Theme: “They Will Call Him Immanuel”

Names are important. They are the way we call out to someone and get their attention, or how we speak about them with others. When we use a name, then we all know who we’re talking about and our brains begin to recall other details about them too: what they look like, what they sound like, memories of things they have done, maybe even where they live or things they have. A name is an inseparable part of someone’s identity; it belongs to them and is used to refer to them.

As important as names are to us, names in Bible times had an even greater importance and were almost always chosen not because the parents liked the name, but because of the meaning behind it. Some names were even changed later in life to reflect what was different about that person now. For example, Abram’s name means “exalted father,” but after God made a spectacular promise to him about his future descendants, his name was changed to Abraham, “father of many nations.” And if you’ve ever thought that your name is long or is hard to spell, the prophet Isaiah had a son named “Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz” – “quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil” in Hebrew. That name was given because judgment was coming soon and the people needed to know! So Bible names were chosen based on meaning, often matched life circumstances, and even taught lessons to the Lord’s people.

So what about this one? “*They will call his name Immanuel.*” (direct “word-for-word” Greek translation) Why would they call him that? “Immanuel.” This name doesn’t really make a lot of sense because life shouldn’t be that way. God has many names, of course, and he reveals a number of them to us in his Word. Most of them make a lot more sense: King, Judge, Lord, Holy One, Creator. God is almighty and powerful and there never has been and never will be anyone else in all creation who will come even CLOSE to being like him. But “Immanuel”? This name is not like the others; this one shouldn’t be.

We also know that words don’t have to be large in order to be powerful. The word “with” is a great example. It’s a small word, and in some languages even smaller and shorter than in English. But no matter what language we speak, this is a word of incredible power. It’s a word of support and togetherness. It expresses

agreement or encouragement. It connects two formerly separated things, joining them in a way they were not before.

It is NOT a word that belongs between “God” and “us.”

As broken people who live in a broken world, we understand very well what it looks like when things come apart and stay that way. Whether it's a baseball through a window, a car smashing into a tree, or an entire structure collapsing to the ground, things in life get broken; things which may never be repairable. And it's not just stuff either. Insults are thrown from one person to another, tearing relationships apart. Injuries and diseases break our bodies. And this is all so sadly familiar to us. Things break and come apart, and sometimes can't be fixed or put back together again. Even if they can, they will never be the way they were before.

In a far more serious way, sin has had that same effect on us and our world. Sin came into our world through the temptation of the devil and the disobedience of human beings, and it broke everything. Nothing was the way God had made it anymore; everything was ruined. Sin quite literally separates us, building a wall between us and others, and even more so between us and God. No matter what lies we tell ourselves, or what flawed logic Satan may try to convince us is true, sin never brings us together. It never unites or connects. It separates us from everyone and stands us all alone, defenseless, deserted, and deserving of destruction.

You and I live with the consequences of that every single day. The natural consequences and results of sin are a life filled with pain, suffering, guilt, shame, and regret. And because we still have not found a way to stop ourselves from sinning, we should still be fully separated from God and everyone else, hidden behind the walls of selfishness, lovelessness, and arrogance we have built around ourselves. Separated, hidden, abandoned, and alone.

And God should keep it that way. He gave rules, laws, and commands, and we broke them all. We took holy words and threw them into the mud of our disobedient lives. We so rarely (if ever) treat them with the full dignity and respect they rightfully deserve. We often have to force and push ourselves just to read or hear his Word at all, and even then we rarely actually do what it tells us.

Since that has been and remains our entire existence so far, God should not want to be WITH us. עִמָּנוּאֵל (“Immanuel” – God with us) should not be a word we ever know or use. Instead, it should be more like בִּלְאֵדַיְנוּאֵל (“biladaynuel”) – God WITHOUT us. Or worse yet, נֶגֶדַיְנוּאֵל (“negedaynuel”) – God AGAINST us. When the battle lines are drawn, God and we should be on opposite sides. God's attitude toward humanity should be “Stay away! I don't want you.”

Do you realize where that would leave us? If there is no Immanuel, there is no forgiveness. No peace. No love, no hope. Even life itself is lost. In the familiar hymn “In Christ Alone”, we sing: “No guilt in life, no fear in death – this is the power of Christ in me.” (CW'21 #510, st. 4) But if we don't have Immanuel, a God who is with us, we end up with the opposite: guilt in life, fear in death, the power of Christ AGAINST me.

Yet here we sit, gathered together in the house of the Lord, the clear Holy Word of God laid out in front of us, listening to a different story. A better story. An undeserved story. An entirely true story of the Lord of heaven and earth, God of all creation, King over everything, who decided that the one thing in the entire universe which would give him the very greatest joy is to be WITH US.

But in order for that to even be possible, God had to be other things as well: “for us”, “instead of us”, and “in place of us.” God had to perfectly fulfill the impossible requirements we faced: spotless obedience to his holy laws and commands. And in order for that to happen, the Lord Jesus needed to come. For the entire season of Advent this year, we have been talking about and looking forward to the Imminent Arrival of Jesus! We’re only one week away now from celebrating Christmas, something we eagerly and joyfully celebrate every year because of what God did on that day: the God who cannot be contained packaged himself up in a tiny human body just like ours. And this God-made-flesh came to the world with one mission – “*to redeem those under law*.” (Galatians 4) We could never fulfill the requirements ourselves, so if we were ever to belong to God, he needed to purchase us by fulfilling the requirements himself. And so he did.

God came to earth to fight for us, conquering and defeating our worst enemies of sin, Satan, and death. God came to earth to perfectly obey instead of us, submitting to and adhering to every single law HE himself had made for us to follow. And God came to earth to willingly be punished in place of us, trading his holy life for our hopeless ones. He did all this so that the name he revealed through the prophets thousands of years ago would be more than just wishful thinking or a temporary happy thought. He came to earth to be our “God-with-us.”

We often talk about what our lives might look like if God were not part of them. But we probably should talk more often about what our lives really do look like, because he IS a part of them! When God became our God-with-us, he took the brokenness of this sin-filled world and solved the problem. He took our sin-stained lives into his hands, and he cleansed them with his own holy precious blood. Because of him, we DO HAVE forgiveness, peace, love, hope, life, even perfect eternal life! He is the reason a familiar hymn is so familiar and loved: because through our Immanuel, we truly have “No guilt in life, no fear in death, and the power of Christ in us.” (see CW’21 #510, st. 4) Jesus changes everything for us: at Christmas, on Good Friday, on Easter, on every day of his perfectly obedient life, every day he rules as King over the universe for the good of his people, at our baptisms, and every single time we open his Word to receive encouragement and strength from the Holy Spirit again.

The difference between “I’m coming” and “I’m here” is a huge one. When someone is still coming, we wait for them, maybe even anxiously standing at the door or window watching for their arrival. But when “I’m coming” changes to “I’m here,” the anxious anticipation is replaced with incredible joy and peace. A friend or family member being “with us” can be a strong comfort for us, at any time in life, but especially at times when we need the love and support of others.

If that's true for us and other people, how much more true it is for God and us. God became Immanuel the first time in order to be our Immanuel forever. He came to earth to be with us so that when our time here ends and we pass through the door of physical death, we will be with him in heaven forever. The holy Lord of everything, God of all creation, has names of tremendous power and honor and glory and might. But one of the greatest is "Immanuel" – "God with us." Because of our sins, this should never be; but because of the unsurpassed love and mercy of our holy God, it is. This is his name, and we know exactly who we're talking about when we use it. It is an inseparable part of his identity, and it helps us think about and remember all the things he has done and continues to do for us – God chose to be with us, did everything necessary to save us, and has prepared a home for us in eternity so we can be with him forever, members of his holy family, fully and freely forgiven and saved. And so with our thoughts, words, actions, and lives, we breathe a sigh of relief and a simple prayer:

Thank you, Jesus, for being our Immanuel. Amen.

And the peace of God which goes beyond all understanding will guard and keep our hearts and our minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.