

BORN FOR SINS

Matthew 1:18-25

Fourth Sunday in Advent (Series A)

December 22, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Fourth Sunday in Advent comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 1, verses 18 through 25. It is on page 681 of the pew Bible.

We're still in the season of Advent, but we come now to the Christmassy portion of the season. During Advent we consider the different ways that Jesus comes to us, and one of those ways, of course, is by taking on human flesh. So Advent isn't just pre-Christmas; it actually includes Christmas. And this gospel lesson reveals the purpose for Jesus' coming.

Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 1, beginning at verse 18, we read in Jesus' name.

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

²³ "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel"

(which means, God with us). ²⁴ When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, ²⁵ but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Rejoice! The Savior of the world has come. The prayer, "O Come, O Come, Immanuel," has been heard and answered. Immanuel has come. God is with us. And he is with us to save us.

We learn this from the two names Matthew records in this text. Did you notice the two names? "Jesus" and "Immanuel." At first glance it might be a little confusing why two different names are prescribed for this child. Only one of them was a name for him to commonly be called by. That's the name Jesus. But both names teach us something about Jesus. One teaches us *who* he is. That is, it gives us his *identity*. And the other teaches us *why* he has come. It gives us his *mission*. "Immanuel" is his identity. "Jesus" is his mission.

Names have meanings. In English the meanings are often a little bit hidden, because we often take foreign names and don't translate them. We just leave them the way they are, and maybe make them sound a little more English. So we don't always name our children as bluntly as other cultures do.

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For example, many parents will affectionately refer to their daughters as “princess.” But not many of them will put it on their birth certificates. But they might put the name “Sarah” on a birth certificate, which is the Hebrew word for “princess.”

Most Hebrew names were more than one word. They might even be a complete sentence. For example, Daniel means “God Is Judge,” Zechariah means “The LORD Remembers,” and Micah means “Who Is like the LORD?” So if you had one of these names, every time someone used your name, they were making some kind of confession of faith about God. That’s kind of cool.

In a few cases, the names were actually prophetic. They taught something about the person who was given the name. And that is most certainly the case with Jesus. The name “Jesus” is given to him by an angel. And the other name we find in this text, “Immanuel,” is assigned to him by the prophet Isaiah (Is. 7:14). And these two names teach us who Jesus is and why he has come.

First, let’s talk about the name “Immanuel.” This name teaches us who this little child is that comes into the world through the virgin Mary. The name “Immanuel” literally means, “God with Us.”

This is miraculous. God has taken on the flesh of a tiny baby human. This is remarkable! That which was conceived in Mary is from the Holy Spirit. Even from the first moments of Jesus’ human existence, he is both God and man in one person. This is remarkable!

Most of the time when we think of Jesus, we think of a full-grown man. And I’m not saying it’s easy to comprehend that the fullness of deity dwells in this full-grown man. It requires faith to believe that. But it’s another thing to consider that the fullness of deity dwelt in the infant Jesus as well. Picture in your minds a newborn infant. He cries. He gets his swaddling clothes messy. He nurses at his mother’s breast. He’s needy and completely helpless. In the case of Jesus of Nazareth, the child born to Mary, this newborn infant possessed the full deity of God in human flesh. God was helpless. God was needy. God kept his mommy up in the middle of the night. That’s what the name “Immanuel” means. It means “God with Us,” even from infancy. The Son of God assumed human flesh. And with that, he took on everything it means to be human, except sin.

As incredible as that may be, the miracle didn’t really occur at Jesus’ birth. The miracle of Christmas occurred about nine months earlier, when the virgin Mary conceived this child by the power of the Holy Spirit. It’s not merely that the fullness of God dwelt in this infant, but the fullness of God dwelt in Jesus the fetus, and Jesus the embryo, and Jesus the zygote.

Luke, in his gospel, records a marvelous encounter between Mary and her relative Elizabeth, who was the mother of John the Baptist. Just a few days after Jesus’ conception, Mary went to visit Elizabeth, and Elizabeth recognized the presence of the Lord God in the womb of Mary (Luke 1:43). At that point in Jesus’ existence, the fullness of God was pleased to dwell in microscopic human flesh. This is what “Immanuel” means. God is with us. He came among us, and he came among us from the very first stages of human existence. Immanuel: “God with Us.”

But why is God with us? If all we knew about Jesus is that he is Immanuel, we wouldn’t really know if that’s good news or bad news for us. If we are quite prideful, we might assume that the presence of God is good for us.

We might think, *He would reward me for being such a nice boy or girl, and he would straighten out all those other people who don’t see things the way I do.* If we are quite prideful, we might assume the presence of God would be a pleasant thing for us.

But that's not really how it goes when people find themselves in the presence of God, or even in the presence of one of his holy angels. When the prophet Isaiah saw the LORD in a vision, he cried, "Woe is me! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Is. 6:5). There was a moment very early in Jesus' ministry when Peter recognized that Jesus is God in human flesh. Peter fell down at Jesus' knees and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:8). Even when people see angels, like when an angel appeared to Zechariah or Mary or the shepherds in the field, they are filled with fear. And these angels merely reflect the glory of God. How much more when you come face to face with the living God?

If we are quite prideful, we might assume that the presence of God is a pleasant thing. If anything, perhaps he has come to teach us how to be nicer boys and girls so that we can get more presents.

But this delusion is quickly erased whenever a person really encounters the living God. More likely, he has come to judge, punish, and destroy us.

If all we know is the name "Immanuel," we should probably assume that this is an extraordinarily dangerous thing, because the name "Immanuel" doesn't tell us why God is with us. The other name gives us the why.

So let's talk about the other name: "Jesus." This is the name the angel assigns to him. And whenever an angel tells you to give your child a certain name, you can bet there's a good reason for the name. The name "Jesus" means "The LORD—or Yahweh—Is Salvation."

And this name, "Jesus," is actually the same as the Old Testament name "Joshua." It just changes a little bit in translation.

If we could hop in a time machine to go back and spy on Jesus' earthly life, we would probably hear his mother and brothers and friends call him something like "Yeshua" (יֵשׁוּעַ); that's probably close to how his name sounded in Hebrew. And that Hebrew name gets translated into English as "Joshua." So Jesus basically has the same name as the Old Testament hero Joshua.

But the New Testament was written in Greek, not Hebrew. And the Hebrew name "Yeshua" becomes "Iēsous" (Ἰησοῦς) in Greek. And "Iēsous" comes into English as "Jesus" instead of "Joshua."

So what's the point? I'm not saying we should start calling Jesus, "Joshua" or "Iēsous" or "Yeshua" instead of "Jesus." We should keep calling him "Jesus." The New Testament was written in Greek, and so "Iēsous" is the name the Holy Spirit inspired to be written down on the page, and "Iēsous" comes into English as "Jesus." That's his name in English, and we speak English, so we should call him that.

But I want us to recognize the Hebrew background to Jesus' name. It's the same as the name "Joshua," and it means, "Yahweh Is Salvation." And it's not just that his name *means*, "Yahweh Is Salvation." That *is* his name. His name *is*, "Yahweh Is Salvation." If we could take a magic translator device with us when we go back in time, we would hear Jesus' mother and brothers and friends call him, "Yahweh Is Salvation."

So when the angel appears to Joseph in a dream, he says something like, "She will bear a son, and you shall call his name 'Yahweh Is Salvation,' for he will save his people from their sins" (1:20-21).

The name "Immanuel" tells us *who* Jesus is; he is "God with Us." And the name "Jesus" tells us *why*: because "he will save his people from their sins."

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That is the meaning of Christmas. Our sin is the reason God became man.

You've probably heard the phrase, "Jesus is the reason for the season." This reminds us that all the commercialism, which Charlie Brown loathed so much, isn't really what Christmas is all about. Nor is family the reason for the season. This is a subtler attack on Christmas. We like family. Family is good; it is a gift from God, but it's also not the point of Christmas. Family is kind of the sanctified secular reason for Christmas. It sounds good and virtuous when someone says, "Christmas is about spending time with family, friends, and other loved ones." This is a case of making the good the enemy of the best. So whenever you hear someone say that Christmas is about family, or charity, or kindness to your neighbor, say to yourself, "No. These things are good, but this is a lie. Christmas is about Jesus." Jesus is the reason for the season.

But let's take it a step further. What was Jesus' reason? This is the really important question. Why did he come? Why is he Immanuel? The answer is your sin. When you consider the image of this little baby Jesus, know that the reason for this is the filthiness of your heart.

It might not be what we want. It might not be what we think we need. But it is what God knew we needed. So that is what he did. He came to save us from our sins, and we must never forget it. The reason for the season is our filthy hearts. Christmas is all about God's love in the face of rebellion.

So whenever you hear that trite little phrase, "Jesus is the reason for the season," say to yourself, "Yes, and what was Jesus' reason? Oh, yes; my sin." That is why he has the name "Jesus," "For he will save his people from their sins" (1:21).

And so, more than anything, Christmas is about the cross. From the moment of his birth, even from the moment of his conception, the purpose of his human existence was to suffer and die for the sins of the world. This child was born under the curse of the law in order to redeem us who are under that curse (Gal. 4:4).

So when you're eating your sweet little Christmas cookies, think to yourself, "What Would this cookie taste like if it accurately reflected Jesus' reason for the season?" For starters, it would be bitter instead of sweet. It would also be absolutely rotten. It would be abhorrent. It would burn your mouth. And it would make your stomach nauseous. Remember that you are eating sweet little Christmas cookies because Jesus drank the bitter cup of God's wrath. And rejoice in this.

The most appropriate symbol of Christmas is not really a manger. It's not a star or a candy cane or a Christmas tree. It's a crucifix. It's a cross, and not merely an empty cross, but an ugly cross with a bleeding and dying Jesus on it, because that is where this is going. That is where this was always intended to go, and God is pleased with this.

This is why Jesus is named "Jesus"—"Yahweh Is Salvation"—"For he will save his people from their sins."

He is Immanuel: "God with Us." And he is Jesus: "Yahweh Is Salvation." Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.