Matthew 1:23 *His Name Is… Immanuel*

***A Devastating Problem***I ran across a story this week that I’d like to share with you. It’s entitled: “My Fiancé is Having Someone Else’s Baby.”

Only a few weeks ago, everything seemed perfect. I had just graduated from school with honors. My girlfriend and I got engaged the same day my father made me a full-partner in his construction business. I was so excited, and definitely in love. Life seemed complete. Even my faith was at an all-time high.

Now I feel as if my life has ended. What seemed like the ideal dream has become a nightmare.

It all started when my fiancé met me after work one Friday. She looked as if something was bothering her, but I couldn’t get her to talk to me about it. My imagination was running wild: didn’t she love me? Did she want to call off the wedding? Did she have cancer? Was she dying? Had her father abused her?

We went to a coffee shop. Finally she whispered the words I hadn’t dared to think: “I’m pregnant.” Then she burst into tears.

I was stunned. “You… pregnant? But we haven’t even…”

A wave of nausea hit me as I realized the horrible truth: because it wasn’t me, it had to be someone else. “Who…is…he?” I forced myself to ask.

She looked down. “You wouldn’t understand. I just want you to know I love you. And if you will have me, I still want to be your wife.”

“If you loved me, you wouldn’t be in the condition you are in!” I snapped.

But I knew I still loved her with all my heart. That was why I hurt so much.

I was too shocked to say anything the rest of the evening. Although I have never been very emotional, I cried myself to sleep. I woke up the next morning angry, full of questions: How could she do this to me? Hadn’t we promised to save ourselves for each other? Didn’t she believe in the standard God had set for relationships? Was she thumbing her nose at her faith?

“I’ve made arrangements to leave town for a while,” she said a couple of days later, as I was closing shop. “I think it is best for you, and me, and our families. I’ll be staying at my cousin’s place, upstate.”

I must have been frowning, because she added, “Don’t worry my love, I’ll be in good hands.” She handed me a piece of paper with a phone number where I could reach her. Then she turned and left.

What do I do now? I loved her so much, despite my anger. And yet, my trust in her had been destroyed.

Still, the thought of walking away from the girl of my dreams left me more confused. The shame and embarrassment of being pregnant and unmarried in our small town would be unbearable for her. She’d be the target of endless harassment.

On the other hand, if I stood by her, and pretended the child was mine, it would destroy my reputation! Which was something I didn’t think I could risk losing to cover her selfish mistake.

My gut feeling was to break off the engagement and try to forget what had happened. But I cared too much for her to make an ugly scene. Maybe I could tell our friends we’d called off the wedding, that it was my idea to break up and that she had to get out of town to escape the pain of the decision…

I want to do what is right. Should I stay with her regardless of what others think? Or should I quietly break off the engagement and just go on with my life? (told by Joshua Harris, “You Shall Call His Name Jesus” <https://vimeo.com/190259523>

What would you do? How would you advise this young man?

I think you know that this is a modern re-telling of the Biblical story of Christmas. This is the dilemma that Joseph faced, when he found that Mary—his betrothed—was found to be with child. Let’s read the original version. **Matthew 1:18-25:**

**18**This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.**19**Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

**20**But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. **21**She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

**22**All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: **23**“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

**24**When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. **25**But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

***Immanuel***I’m not sure exactly how this worked. I don’t know how Joseph knew that the dream he was having was genuine, and not just some bad hummus he had eaten before going to bed. But the angel was convincing, Joseph came to fully believe Mary’s story, and he became the adoptive father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The key verse, for our purposes this evening, is **verse 23:**

**23**“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

This is a quotation of a verse from Isaiah. God had promised a sign, a young maiden with a child, that would remind His people that He was in their midst. And now, 700 years later, the angel of the Lord is declaring that this prophecy is finding it’s complete fulfillment in Mary’s son.

And the reason this verse is key for our purposes is because of the name: **Immanuel**. You see, for the last month, our sermons here at Hope Church have been looking at the names given to God in the Bible. Because names tell us something about God’s nature and character, we’ve been getting the meaning of Christmas through the names of God. This morning, we looked at the proper name given to this baby: Jesus. Tonight, we are looking at the prophetic name. The name that explains exactly what was happening on that first Christmas night.

So, what does Immanuel mean? On Tuesday, the church staff had our annual white elephant gift exchange. And this year, we distributed the gifts a little differently. When you got a gift, you were also asked a trivia question. And if you got the question right, you could pass the gift on. But if you got the question wrong, you were stuck with what was in your hands. And one of the questions was **about Immanuel:**

1. What does “Immanuel” mean?

a. To God be the glory
b. God is exalted
c. God is with us
d. A book with instructions

That tickled me, because of that last option. Get it? “E-manual.” A book with instructions.

But, of course, you all know the correct answer is “C” because we just read it in scripture. **Immanuel means God with us.** This is the meaning of Christmas. This is why we celebrate with special songs and special services. This is why we have a month of preparation and throw parties and exchange gifts. This is why we travel across country to be with family and take days off work. This is why we celebrate: because God is with us! Because God did not stay distant, up in heaven, at a remove—but He took on flesh and blood and came down to earth and moved in with us.

Immanuel. God with us. The meaning of Christmas.

***A Little Poem***
And because Jesus is God with us, that has some implications. My friend Matt, a pastor in Pennsylvania, says there are four applications to this name. He says, because Jesus is God with us we are:

**Not Alone
Not Afraid
Not Abandoned
Not Ashamed.**

It’s almost a little poem. And I hope it is something you will remember from tonight. Because Jesus is God with us we are:

Not Alone
Not Afraid
Not Abandoned
Not Ashamed

I’m not the kind of preacher who asks you to repeat after me very often, but tonight I think I will. I want you to remember this. So let’s say it together. Because Jesus is God with us, we are:

Not Alone
Not Afraid
Not Abandoned
Not Ashamed

***The Lonely Planet***First, because Jesus is God with us, we are **not alone.**

I want to show you some pictures. This first picture is one we’ve all seen, or at least something similar to it. This is a picture of **earth from orbit**. This what our planet looks like to astronauts on the space station.

But back up just a little bit, **from orbit to the surface of the moon**, and earth appears even smaller.

And then, **consider this photo**, taken from the Cassini space explorer. This is a picture of earth taken through the rings of Saturn. At a distance of just under 900 million miles, Earth is a bright blue dot.

And then, **one more picture**. This is taken from the Voyager 1 from about four billion miles away. That little pin prick in the circle isn’t just a picture of earth, that’s our entire solar system.

Here’s my point: seen from the far reaches of space, our planet can seem pretty small and insignificant. There are millions of galaxies our there, billions of stars. And if you hold to an entirely materialistic view of the universe, then we are just floating around out here on spaceship Earth. And even if you do believe that there must be a God who set all this into motion, you might believe He is far too busy to be concerned with us. Maybe He’s like a toy maker in a workshop: He wound everything up and set things to moving, but now He doesn’t pay much attention anymore. If that is true, then we live on a pretty lonely planet.

But the message of Christmas is that God is with us. **We are NOT alone**. God is NOT distant. God is near. God didn’t just set things in motion, He entered into our midst. Ours is the visited planet.

The gospel of Matthew is bookended by this truth. In the very first chapter, verse 23, we are told that Jesus is Immanuel. God with us. Then, in the very last chapter, the last thing Jesus is recorded as saying, **Matthew 28:20:**

 And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

What is true on the cosmic scale is also true at the individual, personal level. Because Jesus is God with us, that means that none of us need to be alone today.

I know that the holidays can amplify feelings of loneliness. These days of get-togethers and parties can be painful for folks who are missing people in their lives. Maybe you are a married couple that has been praying for a baby that just hasn’t come. Maybe you are single, and your heart aches to find that person you can partner the rest of your life with. Maybe you’ve lost somebody this year, or gone through a divorce, or have children who won’t be coming home for the holidays. At any rate, many of us have empty chairs around the Christmas table—either figuratively or literally—and the sense of loneliness can be strong.

And, even if there is nobody missing, even if you are surrounded by people, this time of year can increase the sensation that nobody really knows you, that nobody really gets you, that nobody really understands how you feel.

But the promise here is that God is with you. God gets you. You are not alone. With Jesus, Emmanuel, in your life, you will never be alone.

***The Preposition Box***Or, again, because Jesus is God with us, **we are not afraid.**

Not alone. Not afraid.

I want to share one of my favorite verses with you. I**saiah 41:10:**

So do not fear, for I am with you;
    do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
    I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

This is a fantastic verse, one worth memorizing. And I love it because of how thoroughly it pictures God being with us.

It reminds me of the preposition box. I’ve talked about this before, but some of you have probably haven’t had the privilege. When I was in High School English class, I was taught about prepositions. Prepositions are little words that indicate location. So, we were told to **picture a box.** And we were told that there are certain things you can do with a box, and those things are expressed by prepositions. So, you can be: **beside** the box, **above** the box, **within** the box, **behind** the box or **beneath** the box.

So think about what Isaiah 41:10 is saying, and think about it in terms of the preposition box. God says: “Do not fear, for **I am with you** (Beside). Do not be dismayed, for **I am your God** (Above). **I will strengthen you** (within). **I will help you** (Behind). **I will uphold you** (Below).

Because God is with us, because He thoroughly surrounds us, we do not need to fear.

So look at **Hebrews 13:5-6:**

“Never will I leave you;
    never will I forsake you.”

**6**So we say with confidence,

“The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.
    What can mere mortals do to me?”

Do you hear the logic in that verse? If God is with us, then who can be against us? If Jesus is Immanuel, and we belong to Him, then what do we have to fear?

What are you tempted to be afraid of right now? Is it other people?  What they will do or say or think about you? If God is with you, then what can they do to you?

Or maybe it’s trials like finances or health concerns or a job or security. What are you tempted to be afraid of right now?

The little baby born in Bethlehem carries the name Immanuel because His very existence says to God’s people, “I am with you.”

“Do not be afraid. Fear not! For I am with you.”

***Into the Valley***Third, because Jesus is with us, we are **not abandoned**.

Not alone. Not afraid. Not abandoned.

To the best of my memory, the only person I ever met with the name Emanuel was a guy I knew in college. He was from Rwanda, he was studying at UNI, and he went to my church. This was the mid-1990s.

Now, if you remember your world history, then you know that the African nation of Rwanda in the mid-1990s was not a good place. Rwanda was awash with ethnic violence. A civil war had broken out between the 85% Hutu tribe and the 15%Tutsi tribe. The Hutus controlled the government but the Tutsis had organized an army and were fighting for control.

I do not know which tribe Emanuel was from, but as his name implies, his family was Christian and they sensed the upheaval that was coming and sent him to the United States. I knew him in 1992 and 1993.

It’s a good thing he was in the U.S., because in 1994 all hell broke loose in his homeland. The Rwandan president’s plane was shot down. He was a Hutu, and the Hutus responded by turning on every Tutsi they could find. From April until July nearly 800,000 people died. During this period, local officials and government-sponsored radio stations called on ordinary Rwandan civilians to murder their neighbors. It was a genocide. A killing spree. Total lawlessness. One of the worst examples of the depths humanity is capable of sinking to.

By the summer of 1994 Emanuel was not longer in Cedar Falls, so I was never able to find out what he thought of the violence in his home country. Like I said, I’m not even sure which tribe he belonged to, but I’m certain that he had relatives affected by the horror in one way or another.

But whenever I reflect on the horrible things that happen in our world--whether it is war in southeast Asia or terrorist attacks in the middle east or mass shootings right here in the U.S.—and it is tempting to think that God has forgotten about us and left us to our own devices; I think about Emanuel. I think about what his name means. I think about a young man from Rwanda and the promise that God is with us.

Remember **Psalm 23:4:**

Even though I walk
    through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
    for you are with me;

Even if I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. Why? Because you are with me. Because God is with me. He is my shepherd, and He has not lost track of me. He has not abandoned me. He has not left me to go through it alone.

Not Abandoned. Never Abandoned. That’s what that name, Immanuel, means.

Do you feel like you’ve been abandoned?

I was talking on the phone a while back with someone who said something like, “I feel like God has made a mistake and has let me down. God seems far away.” Sometimes, it feels like we’ve been left to face our darkest valleys alone. Like God has left us behind.

But that’s never the truth. Because Jesus is Immanuel, God is with us. He says, “I’ll be with you always, even to the end of the age.” “Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you.” “Even though you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will be with you.”

***Our Greatest Enemy***Now, fourth: because Jesus is God with us, we are **not ashamed**.

Not alone. Not afraid. Not abandoned. Not ashamed.

Did you know that your greatest enemy is not Kim Jong Un? Did you know that your greatest enemy is not the Russians or the Koreans or Islamic Terrorists? Did you know that your greatest enemy is not even Satan, the enemy of God?

No. Your enemy and mine, the greatest threat to our eternal joy, is ourselves. It is our sin. It is our sin that separates us from God and makes us His enemies.

Our sin. Our breaking of God’s law and our failure to measure up to His glory, ruins our relationship with God and threatens our eternal future.

Our sin. Our guilt. Our shame. That’s our greatest enemy.

And there is nothing you or I can do about it.

We are, by nature, dead in our transgressions and sins. And dead people can’t earn their way back. We can’t rescue ourselves. We can’t bring ourselves to life.

But God in His mercy has sent a Savior for us! That’s what the name Jesus means: “God saves us.” We saw that this morning.

If our greatest need had been education, God would have sent a teacher.
If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent a banker.
If our greatest need had been advice, God would have sent a counselor.
If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent an entertainer.
But since our greatest need was forgiveness, God sent a Savior. His name is Jesus. He is Christ the Lord, the Son of God who came from heaven to earth.

And how does He save us? By becoming “God with us.” By taking on human flesh and blood. That wasn’t just a cool trick He was doing: “Hey, look at me, I can become a human!” It was a necessary step so that He could identify with us fully and take our place as a substitute sacrifice.

He was born to die. And he died so that we would not have to be ashamed. **Romans 10:11:**

**11**As Scripture says, “Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.”

“Never be put to shame.” Jesus came so that we would not have to face the eternal consequences of our sin. So that we would not have to bear the full weight of our transgressions and failures.

We are natural born sinners. We are rebels. We are born as enemies of God, separated from Him and needing to be reconciled again.

But because He took on flesh and then died in that flesh for us, paying our sin-debt, we who believe in him will never be put to shame!

“God with us” means that our sins are forgiven and washed away because of Jesus.

Immanuel is our salvation. God is no longer against us. God is for us. God is with us.
Immanuel.

***Invitation***

**Not Alone
Not Afraid
Not Abandoned
Not Ashamed**

Say it with me.

*Not Alone*
*Not Afraid*
*Not Abandoned*
*Not Ashamed*

Because God is with us.

Now, that’s what it means for Christians.

But if you are not yet a Christian, a faith-follower of Jesus Christ, then it doesn’t mean that for you YET.

If you are not yet a Christian: You are alone. In fact God is against you because of your sin.

If you are not yet a Christian: You should be afraid. Because the wrath of God comes on those who are not with God.

If you are not yet a Christian: You will be abandoned. One of the most terrible things about Hell is that it is place where the inhabitants can truly say, “I am not with God. God is not with me.” Forever.

And if you are not yet a Christian: You should be ashamed. You are still in your sins. And you will reap the consequences.

But you don’t have to be!

Jesus has come.

Immanuel has come.

Trust Jesus tonight. Put your faith in Him and Him alone.

The Bible says that to those who receive Him, to those who believe in His name, He gives the right to become children of God.

You cannot earn this salvation, but you must receive it by faith.

Have you come to trust in Jesus as your Savior and Lord?

Many people think that they will be saved because they have done good things or been a reasonably good person.

But you can’t save yourself any more than you can jump across the United States in single bound.

Some people think that they will be saved because they have gone to church every Christmas and every Easter for the last 75 years.

But going to church doesn’t make you a saved person any more than living in a garage makes you a car.

Some people think that they will be saved because their parents or grandparents are Christians and they were raised to know what is right.

But God has no grand-children. Only children. And the only ones who are His children are those who have received Him by faith. Is that you?

Trust Jesus. Right where you are. Tell Him right now that you need Him and that you want Him to be your Savior and your Lord.

And you will be saved and you will be able to say.

*Not Alone*
*Not Afraid*
*Not Abandoned*
*Not Ashamed*

Immanuel – God with us.