

## “O Emmanuel ”

Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:18-25; Matthew 28:18-20

December 22, 2019  
in Advent

Fourth Sunday

*“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means God with us). (Matthew 1:23)*

“God helps those who help themselves.” This is a well-known and ancient proverb. It almost sounds biblical. Some people even think it’s from the Bible, but it is not. I remember, as a boy, reading Greek mythology and the story from which this proverb comes. The story is about a man whose wagon wheel get stuck in the mud and he prays to Hercules to help him, rather than actually trying to get the wagon wheel freed on his own. Hercules chastises the man for not trying to do anything to help himself and then says, “God helps those who help themselves.”

Even though this proverb seems to put forth good common sense and, some people think, if not in the Bible, should be, it is actually non biblical, even anti-biblical. The truth is that God helps the helpless. He helps those those who cannot help themselves. God saves those who cannot save themselves.

This may seem odd, even insulting, to us here in America in the 21<sup>st</sup> first century. We tend to believe that we can do anything if we just believe enough in ourselves and work hard enough. This applies especially to spiritual matters. In this way, the proverb would make a lot of sense. After taking the initial step to help ourselves, then God would come in and do the rest.

The fact of the matter is, in terms of our relationship with God, we cannot help ourselves. In our confession of sins today, we said, “We have sinned in thought, word, and deed, and that we cannot free ourselves from our sinful condition.” If God only helps those who help themselves, then we are in big trouble because, when it comes to sin, we have just admitted that we cannot free ourselves from it. We are in bondage to sin and death. Prisoners can do nothing to free themselves; the dead can do nothing to raise themselves. God must come to us because we cannot go to Him. He must help us because we cannot help ourselves. He must reach down to us because we cannot reach up to him. He must come and be with us.

The promise of this last antiphon in Advent is the promise of Emmanuel – God is with us. This was the sign spoken by Isaiah to a panic stricken king, Ahaz. Ahaz’s enemies had conspired against him. Ahaz responded by striking a deal with the king of Assyria. Isaiah tried to warn Ahaz about the foolishness of depending upon political or military alliances and to encourage him that God was with him. Isaiah even offered Ahaz the opportunity to pick out that sign, but Ahaz, focusing in on his various alliances and treaties, would have none of it.

So Isaiah offered a sign to Ahaz, but Ahaz refused. It was the sign of Emmanuel. “The virgin is conceiving and bearing a son and shall call his name Immanuel.” God is with us – a most miraculous and unique sign of all. Yet Ahaz refused to believe in Emmanuel. He refused to believe that God was with him. Ahaz trusted in himself and

his own efforts to win the day. As a result, Ahaz was overthrown and his kingdom was defeated. The problem was not that God had deserted Ahaz, but that God was with Ahaz and Ahaz refused to believe in God's good and gracious presence.

This serves as a microcosm of humanity's life and relationship with God. God created Adam and Eve and was truly present with them with His mercy. It was the closest and most intimate of fellowships, but Adam and Eve chose to end it. They chose a course of action which they felt would make their lives better, but was in conflict with God's command. Eating the forbidden fruit seemed like a good idea at the time. It would feed them. It would be delicious. And it would cause them to be like God.

However, it did none of those things. Instead of improving their relationship with God as they must've thought it would, it severed that relationship. Instead of God being truly and directly present with them, they were separated from God, as were their descendants, including Ahaz and including us.

We may not be personally facing a military invasion or the temptation to be like God, but we do feel real fear and experience real problems. We are tempted to be the God of our own lives. We search for solutions to our fear and answers to our problems. Like Adam and Eve and like Ahaz, we often seek relief from our fear in the things of this world: wealth, possessions, politics, and the like. We propose answers to our problems that make all the sense in the world – this world. Like Ahaz, we may not trust in God except as a last resort. Like Adam and Eve, our solutions may be in conflict with His commands. We are stuck in a quagmire of our own creation and can't get out.

Since we can't get out, God comes into our situation. He is not a God who sits on the sidelines, watching us falter and fail. He is the God who gets involved, who puts on the uniform and plays the game. He doesn't watch helplessly from His throne in heaven while we destroy each other here on earth. He sets down His crown, takes off His royal robes, and puts on the work clothes of the servant. He takes on our humanity. And in our humanity He humbles himself to death on a cross. Emmanuel works and weeps and suffers and sleeps and bleeds and dies..

That's the meaning and the hope of these antiphons. It is not just that the Messiah is some disembodied Wisdom, the mighty Lord or the King of Nations, or metaphors such as a root, a key, the dayspring, and so on. It is that the Messiah has become one of us in every way but without sin. The virgin birth is not just a doctrine to be believed and confessed. The incarnation of the Son of God is not just the basis for a cute Nativity scene. It is not just that God was born as a baby in Bethlehem but that God as man was delivered up to death on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. It is not just that Jesus died either, but He rose again to new life with the promise and assurance that we will live with him forever in heaven. God becomes man so that man might share in all which God has.

You may make the mistake of seeing Emmanuel – God with us – is only an historical event which was nice for the people at that time but cannot be reduced located today. In other words, God was with them in the flesh, but no longer. That would be a mistake.

The signs of Emmanuel are all around us. God is still God with us. Advent calls us to these signs and invites us to see them anew. Where is God with you to save

you? In the water of your Baptism. There He is with you to make you His own. When Jesus was baptized, He went down into the water and came up, bearing the sin of the world with the Father voicing his approval and the Holy Spirit descending upon Him. In our baptism, we come out of the water with the righteousness of Christ, with the Father voicing his approval, and the Holy Spirit dwelling in us.

He is God-with-you in the word that speaks forgiveness to you. "He who hears you, hears me," Jesus said of those He sent. In the order of Confession which I often use with homebound people, it ends with the question, "Do you believe that my forgiveness is God's forgiveness?" That is the Emmanuel question. Do you believe that God is with us in this word? To hear this forgiveness as God's forgiveness? That is a great gift which Emmanuel arranges in order to speak with us in a way that we can hear Him!

He is God with us in His Supper. You cannot get any closer to God than you do at the altar. There, you receive His own body and blood, conceived in and born of Mary, sacrificed on Golgotha, raised from the dead, enthroned in heaven above, yet humbly managed in bread and wine for you for the forgiveness of sins. There is no greater gift, no greater opportunity, and no more miraculous experience of Emmanuel – God with us – than in this great sacrament.

This promise of Emmanuel – God with us – is not reserved to children's Christmas Eve services or the subject of a Christmas card. It is not limited to the church building where absolution is pronounced, the Gospel preached, Baptism administered and the Lords Supper distributed. It is not a localized presence. As Jesus calls people out of the world, washes away their sin, creates faith in their hearts, and then sends them back out into the world, He promises to be Emmanuel at that time as well. Just before ascending into heaven, Jesus said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:19-20)

Jesus is Emmanuel, the only Emmanuel there ever was, the only one there will ever be, the only one you ever need. When He appears in glory, He will be the same Emmanuel who came by the Virgin Mary, who laid in a manger, who died for you on the cross, who comes to you now in His Baptism, Word, and Supper. The good news, as we end our observance of Advent, is that you're never alone is one of the Lord's baptized believers. God is with you – Emmanuel. Let us stand and once again and sing the first verse of that ancient hymn, not to bring Him into our presence, but to help us remember that we are always in His presence and to, "Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuelle shall come to you, O Israel." (Stand to sing verse one.)