

THEY WILL CALL HIM IMMANUEL

Matthew 1:18-25

Key Verse: 1:23

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

Yesterday at my house, we had a big birthday party for my grandson Alex. All of us were happy to celebrate his birthday. He was the center of our attention. Suppose we prepared the party for him but forgot to invite him. It would be a strange party. Yet, this is what some people do for Christmas. They forget to invite Jesus to their party. Beginning with Black Friday, they check a list of things for the party. Christmas tree, check. Presents wrapped in colorful paper, check. Delicious food and drink, check. Christmas music, check. But Jesus is missing. Worse yet, they invite a wrong person, one with a white beard and a big belly, and who says, “Ho, ho, ho.” Is this a picture of your Christmas? In today’s passage, we learn that God sent his Son to save us from our sins. Jesus is Immanuel—“God with us.” What does this mean to you personally? Let us think about the real reason why we celebrate Christmas.

I. MARY AND JOSEPH (18-20; 24-25)

Look at verse 18. *“This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph....”* This story begins with a young girl who was pledged to be married to a man named Joseph. He was a carpenter. In God’s providence, Joseph and Mary were engaged. At that time, there were three stages in Jewish marriage. First, the families arranged the marriage. Second, it was publicly announced. At this stage, the couple was “pledged.” This was more than today’s engagement, as it was tantamount to legal marriage. The pledge could be broken only by death or divorce. It lasted for a year. Finally, they were married in a village-wide, week-long ceremony.

Like any engaged couple, Joseph and Mary dreamed about their upcoming marriage. Joseph worked hard to save money to support his new family. He made nice furniture for his bride, perhaps a handsome rocker or love seat. Mary knitted beautiful quilts to decorate their new home. She couldn’t wait for the day they would be blessed by their families and village people. It was going to be a perfect wedding, she thought.

One day, however, a totally unexpected thing happened to them. Look at verse 18b. *“... but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.”* A word came to Joseph that his fiancée Mary was pregnant. What was even more shocking was that she claimed she became pregnant through the Holy Spirit. What did Joseph do in this situation? He did not become angry, though I am sure he felt betrayed by his fiancée. He decided to deal with the problem with God’s help. Look at verse 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.”* The law said that a woman who was found pregnant before marriage must be exposed to public disgrace.

Such woman was stoned to death (Dt 22:20,21). But Joseph didn't want that to happen to Mary. He had in mind to divorce her quietly. He was a man of compassionate heart. He acted with compassion, despite the feeling of betrayal.

How could Joseph do this? He was a man of faith. I believe that he got down on his knees and prayed to God before making a decision. Then God helped him to think about Mary's life more than his own. He was willing to risk his reputation in order to save her. Then what happened? Look at verse 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.'"* In answer to his prayer, the Lord revealed to him what was going on. Joseph was relieved to find that Mary did not betray him. When he woke up from his dream, he did what the angel had commanded him (24). He took Mary home as his wife. This was not an easy thing to do. It was a shame for his family. It was a shame for his relatives. It was against the Law of Moses. But Joseph took the pregnant woman as his wife, in obedience to God's word. He was willing to sacrifice himself to obey the Lord.

Look at verse 25. *"But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus."* There was no honeymoon for Joseph and Mary. He was a man of pure heart. Matthew 5:8 says, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." I think this gives us a clue on why God used Joseph and Mary in his redemptive history. Mary was pure. She was a virgin who prayed to the Lord. She obeyed the word of God. Joseph had a compassionate heart. He was also obedient to the word of God. Joseph and Mary were ordinary people, but because of their obedient faith, they were blessed to be the human parents of our Lord Jesus. They had their own plan for their lives. But when God told them to do something that was very different from their plan, they willingly obeyed his words. Likewise, God has his plan for our lives, and often it does not coincide with our own. Like Joseph and Mary, we must keep our hearts pure before God and obey his word so that we may be used in his redemptive history.

I had my own plan for my life before God intervened. My plan was that I would study hard, get a good job and make a lot of money. Then I would buy a nice house with a pretty garden. I would get married at the age of 32, have a couple of kids, and live happily ever after. It was an ordinary dream. The problem was that God was not in the plan. I would have lived and died in sin. But in his great mercy and love, God intervened in my life. He saved me through the blood of Jesus, and called me to campus mission. I was married when I was 26 to a woman of God so that I may live a life of faith and mission. I thank God everyday for intervening in my life.

II. THE NAME JESUS (21)

Look at verse 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."* The name *Jesus* is the Greek form of *Joshua*, which means, *"the Lord saves"* (NIV footnote). In this verse, "his people" refer to the people of Israel. At that time, Israel was occupied by the Roman

Empire. The people of Israel suffered a lot because of the military oppression and heavy taxation by the empire. They thought they were miserable because of their political and economic situation. They thought that their problem was the Roman occupation. So they longed for a messiah who could free them from their bondage to Rome. They were waiting for a political messiah.

But verse 21 says that Jesus was born to save his people from their sins. This teaches us that sin is the most fundamental problem facing the mankind. In Mark 2, we read about a man who was paralyzed. He had to lie on a mat 24/7. He couldn't even go to bathroom on his own. Everybody thought that his problem was the paralysis. But when he was brought to Jesus for healing, Jesus surprised everyone. He said, "Son, your sins are forgiven" (Mk 2:5). Jesus declared that his sin was much more serious than his debilitating disease. We have many problems in this world. There are threats from nuclear and chemical weapons. A rampant opioid epidemic is killing 100 Americans everyday. A floodgate is opening to expose the sexual misconducts of those who are in prominent positions. But these are only symptoms of the root problem called sin. Sin destroys our souls by cutting our relationship with God, the Creator. Nothing and no one can save us from this. We need the Savior. And God in his great mercy sent his Son Jesus to save us from our sins! This is the real reason why we celebrate Christmas.

Jesus was born to save us from our sins. What is so terrible about our sins that God himself had to come all the way from heaven to take care of us? How serious is our sin? I asked my students to tell me one major sin they committed. One said it was his doubt about God's existence. Yes, that is a serious sin. The Bible says that everything that does not come from faith is sin (Ro 14:23). Another student said it is his lustful desire. Well, I think most young people, and old people, struggle with this sin. We can think of many other sins we are guilty of, such as jealousy, anger, hatred, envy, greed and pride. How about idolatry? I mean putting something or someone else where God belongs, that is, your heart, such as money, children, career, and human achievement. We must admit that we are sinners before God. If you think that you are a little better than other people and so you are okay with God, think again. Sin kills a person whether it is small or big. We are all sinners. There no one righteous, not even one (Ro 3:10). To begin with, we were born with sin. We are descendants of Adam. The sinful blood flows in our body. You may protest, saying, "That's not fair!" But wait. We are sinners by choice also. We knew what was right and what was wrong, but we deliberately chose to sin. We saw cheesecake and celery sticks on the dessert table, and we knew which one is good for our artery, but we still chose cheesecake. Sin comes with sweet temptation. And there is more. We are sinners by practice. When you watch pornography on computer for the first time, you feel guilty. But when you do the second or third time, your guilt is not as strong. In summary, we are sinners by birth, by choice and by practice. We don't have any excuse before God. We have fallen, and we cannot get up. This is why even a great man like St. Paul cried out, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?" (Ro 7:24).

We are all condemned sinners. Sin is compared to cancer, because it starts small, then spreads to the entire body to kill the person. I think sin is much worse than cancer,

because not everyone gets cancer but everyone is inflicted with sin. Some people smoke all their life but do not get cancer. Some people never smoke but get lung cancer and die. Cancer is scary, because of this random nature and because of the low survival rate. But we should be more concerned about sin than cancer, because everyone is sick with sin and the survival rate is absolutely zero. No chemotherapy, no radiology, no bone-marrow transplant can cure us. Now we can understand why God himself had to be born to a virgin to take care of us. No human being can save another human from sin, no matter how powerful the person may be. Why not? It is because all humans are sinners condemned to death. We are all death-row inmates. No inmate can save another inmate. Someone outside must come and unlock the prison door to set us free. That someone is Jesus. He came from heaven to this world, born to a virgin, to set us free from sin and death.

III. IMMANUEL (22-23)

Look at verses 22-23. *All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).* The author Matthew quotes from Isaiah 7:14 which said, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” As Isaiah prophesied 700 years before it happened, Jesus was born to a virgin named Mary. Just as God promised in Genesis 3:15, Jesus was born as the woman’s offspring.

Now let us think about why the virgin birth of Jesus is important to us. Jesus was born to a virgin. Joseph was not his real father. God said to Joseph that what was conceived in Mary was from the Holy Spirit. In fact, Joseph did not consummate the marriage until after Jesus was born. Again, why did God have to come to us through a virgin? This is a profound mystery. Important truths are hidden in this mystery. Let us think about them.

First, Jesus came to us as a human but without sin. Jesus was born to a virgin to become just like one of us. He came as a 100% human being. If you pinched him on his arm, he would have said, “Ouch.” From the gospels, we know that Jesus became tired, hungry, and thirsty. He sometimes felt sad and anguished. This is amazing. The Creator God became just like one of his creatures. Yet, Jesus was without sin. He was born without any trace of sin, because he was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Jesus never sinned, neither by choice nor by practice. Jesus was the only person in the world without sin. This is important, because as I said earlier, a prison inmate cannot save another inmate. Jesus came from heaven with a key to unlock the prison and set us free. And the key was his own life that he sacrificed on the cross to pay for our sins. He died on the cross to set us free. What an amazing love! This is what the author of Hebrews says, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Heb 4:15-16).

Second, Jesus is the Immanuel God who came to be with us. Jesus was conceived through the Holy Spirit. He was born to a virgin. Jesus is 100% God and 100% human. Because he is God, he has the power and authority to deliver us from sin (Col 2:13-15). When Jesus said to the paralyzed man, “Son, your sins are forgiven,” some Jewish leaders accused him of blasphemy, saying, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” What they did not know was that Jesus is God who came from heaven to be with us. Again, how amazing is this! We were actively sinning against God, sometimes not even realizing we were sinning against God. We did not do anything to deserve his love. In fact, we did everything to deserve his punishment. But in his great mercy, God decided to come down to this world to save us. We fell down and we were helpless. We could not do anything to save ourselves. So God came down to us. He gave up all the glory, power, splendor in heaven to come to this corrupt world, to corrupt sinners like you and me. God didn’t send Jesus on a spaceship. If he did, Jesus would be an alien to us. Jesus was not born in Caesar’s palace. If he did, ordinary people like you and me could not relate to him. Jesus was born to a virgin in an animal barn and he was laid in a manger. This humble birth of Jesus deeply moved the heart of St. John. He exclaimed, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14).

St. Damien of Molokai (1840-89) was a Roman Catholic priest who devoted his life to missionary work among the Hawaiian lepers. At the age of 24, he went to the island of Molokai which was a lepers’ colony established by the Hawaiian government. The condition of the island was miserable. Father Damien did his best to provide spiritual, physical, and emotional comfort to those suffering from the debilitating and incurable disease. But no matter what he did, they would not open their hearts to him, because he was not one of them--he was not a leper. So Damien prayed, “Lord, help me to become a real friend to these people.” He served them more sacrificially. One day, as he was warming his hands on fire, he felt nothing. He put his hands on top of the fire, but he felt nothing. Then he exclaimed, “Thank you, Lord. Finally, I have become their real friend.” He had become a leper. From then on, the people in the island began to open their hearts to him. They accepted his love for them, and more importantly, they accepted the love of Christ for them. Because of one man’s sacrificial love, the cursed island was turned into a paradise island. This happened because Damien was with them, becoming like them.

God came to be with us, becoming like one of us. Jesus is Immanuel—God with us. This also moved the heart of Matthew, the author of this gospel. He used to be known as Levi the tax collector. The people of Israel hated tax collectors, because they were the henchmen of the empire. They were traitors, sucking the blood of their own people. In this situation, becoming a tax collector was akin to becoming a drug dealer today. But Levi decided to become a tax collector, thinking that money would make him happy. He became a selfish man. He did make a lot of money, but he wasn’t happy. No one wanted to be friends with him. Even his family members despised him.

One day Levi was sitting in his tax collector's booth. He was lonely. No one even talked to him. But Jesus came to him and said, "Follow me." It meant, "Levi, you have been following your selfish desires. Now, follow me as my disciple." Levi was moved by Jesus' calling. Despite his sin, God did not abandon him. God was with him. Jesus gave him a second chance in life. Without hesitation, he got up and followed Jesus immediately. And his life was changed 180. The selfish man was changed into St. Matthew who recorded the beautiful Sermon on the Mount. Matthew would love to share his life testimony again and again, saying, "You know, I was rich but miserable, because I was selfish. But Jesus changed me into a new person!"

In conclusion, we learned that Jesus is Immanuel—"God with us." I want to leave you with one question. Have you met Jesus personally and committed your life to him? If not, I strongly encourage you to pray to God that you may be able to do so today, knowing that Jesus came all the way from heaven to be with you and to save you from your sin. To those who have been saved already, is Jesus still Immanuel to you? Is he with you personally? Are you with him everyday? If not, let us repent, and rekindle our love for him today. Christmas is about God who came to be with us. May the Immanuel God be with you! May God help you to be with him through sincere prayers and Bible studies!