

Immanuel
Matthew 1:18-25

Sometimes it is helpful to summarize and encapsulate the teaching of Scripture in very simple ways, for that can become very memorable. One example relates to our text this afternoon, as we can here identify the key theme of the whole of the Old Testament revelation God has given us. One overall theme that captures the whole essence of what God has progressively revealed from the beginning to the end of the Old Testament. That climactic theme is simple to express and equally easy to understand. It is defined by the words, “God with us.”

That is the central promise of the Old Testament, God with us. The central prophecy of the Old Testament, God with us. And as you go from beginning to end of the Old Testament, you see the progressive unfolding of this theme, God with us. But most of all, when you move from the Old Testament to the New, you see how the promise of the Old Testament becomes the reality of the New Testament. “God with us” is the prophetic anticipation of every chapter, every word of the Old Testament. And the whole of the New Testament is given as an exposition and explanation of the fulfillment of that promise. God with us.

You know the Hebrew word for this promise, God with us. You really should keep a list of all those Hebrew and Greek words that you know. The length of that list would probably surprise you. Surely here is one of the words on that list. The English, “God with us.” The Hebrew, Immanuel.

I could break it down a little bit. The ending, “el,” pronounced “el”, is God’s name. Sometimes more fully elohim, but often just the abbreviated “el.” The beginning of the word is the English preposition “with,” the “Im...” in Immanuel. So “Imman” means

“with us,” and “Immanuel,” is translated, “With us, God!” What an absolutely glorious and astounding thought!

And so the transition from the Old to the New is the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the event in human history when it could rightly be said that God lived and dwelt with men. We read of that incarnation in the theological language of John’s gospel,

John 1:1 “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men...14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

According to John, the word of God is nothing less than the second person of the trinity, the eternal word through whom all things were made. And the word became flesh. God became flesh. God, the eternal God, took a human nature. The word was made man. That is the theological description. In our text this afternoon, we have the personal description. They are one and the same!

So, from the personal perspective we read,
v.18

Now, I admit to you, that this is one of the hardest texts to preach on, simply because it is so familiar. The Christmas story. The birth of Jesus. Everyone knows it, at least in this country. And all of you are very, very familiar with it. So my challenge is to make it mean something more than just the Christmas story. Something more than an important part our comfortable and familiar Christmas traditions.

I understand that the Christmas decorations will soon be put up in some stores and malls. The Halloween sales won't even be completed and no one seems to be able to commercialize the Thanksgiving holiday with any success, so the Christmas season will be commercialized before us very soon. But, of course, true Christians want something far more than all of that.

And we need something more than the sentimental memory of family Christmas traditions long held when it comes to these biblical descriptions of Jesus' birth. So let me begin with an emphasis upon,

I. THE SUPERNATURAL POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

That is the focus. Not so much Mary, but God the Holy Spirit
v.18

Something absolutely obvious is being declared, isn't it? Something that had never happened before. It will never happen again. A woman became pregnant, that's normal enough, but the begetting was done not by a male human being, but by the immediate power of the Holy Spirit. There was no male contribution. There was no male participation. A woman became pregnant and would bear a child without a man. Such is the power of the holy spirit. And such is,

A. The miracle of the virgin birth.

There is a lot of talk this election cycle about what is now so consistently called the freedom of choice, referring to the choice granted by the law in our country for a woman to have the choice whether or not to permit an unborn child within her womb to live. She is given the choice to end that life which grows within her own body, under the guise of the right to control her own body. And according to the popular attitude of our day, no one should have the right to tell her what to do with her own body.

But the whole point of a pregnancy is that there is no longer one body, but two. Two people, two souls, two human beings created in the image of God. And it is no secret that that second person, that tiny person developing inside of a woman began with the genetic union of a sperm and an egg. Simple, basic high school biology.

But what happened on this one occasion was a virgin birth. A virgin conception. A woman, before she had ever come together to be with a man, a woman conceived in her womb a new and separate person.

Now, don't miss the explicit language in which the moral purity of Mary and Joseph is declared and defined. There is no misunderstanding. This was a miracle. A supernatural act of God in which he brought about something by his own power that cannot be explained by natural causes. There is no possible natural, ordinary explanation. And the text describes the scene so personally.

v.19-20

There is much to say there in praise of Joseph. He drew the only conclusion a man could possibly draw, that his fiancée had been unfaithful to him and had engaged in an immoral relationship with another man. After all, there was no other way to explain her pregnancy. But even so, he would treat her kindly, "unwilling to put her to shame." He would divorce her quietly, ending the engagement or betrothal without any further insult to this woman he had prepared to marry. He wouldn't pursue the public lawsuit that would potentially subject her to the punishment of stoning. He wouldn't pursue that legal avenue that would bring her, at best, public scorn and shame. But in his own principles of honor, he could not enter into marriage vows with her.

All of that personal description serves to highlight the miraculous nature of Mary's conception. Joseph was not the human or biological father to this child. Mary, of course, knew the full explanation and had demonstrated her own godliness in response to the Angel Gabriel's announcement,

Luke 1:30 And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34 And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" 35 And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. 36 And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her."

Such a godly young woman. Such a praiseworthy response. "I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." Such a commitment and an attitude worthy of our imitation. Don't miss that in all of this. The story is familiar to us, but it wasn't familiar to Mary! This was her body, as we would say today. And there was nothing in her that would respond with the foolish and selfish declarations of today, that nobody could tell her what she could or couldn't do with her body. No, for Mary, this child was a child. And as absolutely impossible it must have been to comprehend fully what the angel told her, she simply said, "Let it be to me according to your word."

Joseph, for his part, responded in a similar way to the angelic message he received.

v.24-25

Again, let me emphasize that all of those personal reactions are given to highlight the obvious reality of the miracle that had taken place. The supernatural event by the a godly, virtuous young woman became pregnant and conceived a child in her own womb by the power of the Holy Spirit at work. And I don't need to emphasize how thoroughly this notion of a virgin birth is rejected and denied by both unbelievers and many professed believers alike, those we would identify with liberalism.

But liberalism is not Christianity, and our presbyterian forefathers were right to include this miracle of the virgin birth within the narrow list of fundamentals of the Christian faith, because if you deny this miracle, you deny the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. You deny the doctrine of the God-man, and you are left with a purely human Jesus, a man unqualified and unable to satisfy the justice of God which our sins deserve. In other words, without the virgin birth, there is no savior. There is no forgiveness of sin, no mediator between God and man.

So I will declare to you what the Bible teaches: "Christ, the Son of God, became man, by taking to himself a true body and a reasonable soul, being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost in the womb of the virgin Mary, and born of her, yet without sin."

More fully from our Confession of Faith, "The Son of God, the second person in the Trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance and equal with the Father, did, when the fullness of time was come, take upon him man's nature, with all the essential

properties, and common infirmities thereof, yet without sin; being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost, in the womb of the virgin Mary, of her substance. So that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion. Which person is very God, and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man.”

You see, the miracle is not simply that a woman became pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit, but that God became flesh.

B. The miracle of the incarnation of God.

God became flesh. The second person of the trinity took upon himself man’s nature. It was a real human nature. He was a real man. Fully man, and that manhood was inseparably joined to his Godhead. God dwelt among us. The word became flesh. That which was conceived in the woman is from the Holy Spirit. The unborn child in the womb of Mary is the incarnation of God.

Too often, perhaps, we miss that emphasis and focus only the process of the virgin birth. But the purpose for that process was to produce the intended result. The emphasis here is not upon the pregnancy of Mary, but upon that the child who was conceived. He was God in the flesh.

Let me hesitate for a moment here and make a very important application. For all of the good and necessary theological reasons why Jesus had to be both God and man, let me emphasize a personal and pastoral reason. I have good reason to emphasize this application because the book of Hebrews does. Turn with me to,

Heb. 2:14 “Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of

flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. 16 For indeed He does not give aid to angels, but He does give aid to the seed of Abraham. 17 Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. 18 For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted.”

You see, beloved, he was a man. A man in every way like us. Without sin, to be sure, but tempted in his humanity. And because he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. In other words, you and me. He had to be made like us so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest. And so he is.

The miracle of the incarnation of God is such that you and I have help in our struggle against sin. The miracle of the incarnation of God is such that you and I have the forgiveness of sins because he gave himself for our sins, as we studied this morning. Because of the miracle of the incarnation of God, we have help and we have hope.

And, in the incarnate Jesus, God dwells among us and we, therefore, see his glory, full of grace and truth. We see the glory of God, for we have seen Jesus. The miracle of the incarnation of God.

Notice something else then in our text. Notice that all of this was predicted. And so we have,

C. The miracle of prophetic fulfillment.

It was a miracle, wasn't it, that a prophet in the 8th century BC would predict all of this. The king was Ahaz. The time was shortly before the fall of Israel in 722 BC. And Ahaz was stubborn. He would not take the Lord's help or encouragement, and would not ask for a sign of God's promise to his people Israel. So the Lord provided his own sign

Isaiah 7:1-9

Isaiah 7:10-17

And so, in many ways the central promise of the whole of the Old Testament, God predicts that a virgin will bear a son. And everything that we read in Matthew's gospel is but a fulfillment of that miraculous prophecy.

Well, let's move on and go to next level of depth by looking more closely at these names that are given, the name Jesus itself as well as the name Immanuel. Both of those names emphasize,

II. THE SUPERNATURAL WORK OF JESUS CHRIST.

And this fits in so clearly with the sermon this morning from Galatians, for the name "Jesus" itself describes the work that he came to do. The name Jesus means "God saves." The first letters are the Hebrew Jah, the beginning of Jahweh or Jehovah. The personal, covenantal name of God. Followed by a form of the verb to save. It is the familiar Old Testament name Joshua, coming out in the Greek simply Jesus!

And the idea of the name is clear.

A. God saves his people.

That's the point. Not a baby in a manger. Not all of those

sentimental traditions that surround the upcoming Christmas holiday. No, the idea is a spiritual one, a religious one. A personal one. The meaning of Jesus' name and the very purpose of his identity is that God saves his people. God himself saves his people. In other words, we don't save ourselves.

This simple message became the foundation of the apostolic preaching in the book of Acts.

Acts 4:11 "This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.' 12 Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

Acts 5:29 "But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: "We ought to obey God rather than men. 30 The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. 31 Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. 32 And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him."

Jesus saves. That's the evangelistic invitation of the gospel. That's the foundational doctrine of our Christian faith. Jesus saves, or as we read,

Gal. 1:3 "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, 4 who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, 5 to whom be the glory forever and ever."

There is a second name, isn't there? One I've already mentioned. A name that stands as the central theme of the whole Bible, the central promise of the Old Testament made so clear at the very outset of the New Testament. The name Immanuel. And it means,

B. God lives with his people.

v.22-23

God lives with his people. God dwelling among his people, revealing his glory to his people. In the flesh. The second person of the trinity taking a human nature, living among man in the fullest way possible. Unimaginable, even. Impossible, we might say. But that is what took place.

When God said to Abraham, “I will be with you,” the ultimate fulfillment is Immanuel. When God promised Moses, “I will be with you,” the ultimate fulfillment is Immanuel. When God promised David that his descendant would reign upon his throne forever, the ultimate fulfillment is Immanuel. God with us.

And when you struggle with your sin, when you are tempted to sin, the hope and promise is the same. Immanuel. God, with us, a merciful and faithful high priest, able to help. And yet fully God.

As the writer of Hebrews puts it again in chapter 4,
Heb. 4:14 “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

That’s why this matters. That’s why this is so crucial for your faith and your encouragement today. God is with us! God the Son became a man, and continues to be a man. As such, he is our only Mediator, and we offer our worship through him. So beloved, because of that, hold fast your confession. With

confidence. Not in yourself, but in Immanuel. God is with us.

Heb. 4:16 “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”