Isaiah 9:6-7, Matthew 1:18-25

“Encountering Emmanuel”

Is there anything better than Advent? The church looks beautiful. There is a real sense of family during this time. A warmth that basically makes everyone feel good. We are in our second week of the sermon series “Encountering the Christ”. Last week we saw our beloved Savior encountering Nicodemus. This week we find the encounter of Emmanuel, baby Jesus, God with us, with the rest of the world.

I received a wonderful email yesterday from a French woman who was very active with our Soup Kitchens in Moscow and especially the ministries we had with the children of poor families. She was an incredible servant. Her husband and her had been trying to have kids for over a decade. She sent me an email with pictures of her new baby boy. What a great early Christmas gift for them and for us as we have been praying faithfully for that to take place. I hope you don’t mind me sharing answered prayers, especially those types, today.

Isaiah speaks about a child being given to us. It is a famous passage used by Handel in his work the Messiah. Matthew uses Isaiah’s Scripture to couch his birth narrative in history so that we can see the birth of Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, is not out of the blue but is rooted in history and that should have an impact on us as well.

You know, it is so tempting to focus on Mary and Joseph and their encounter with their son, but today we are going to talk about Jesus. The birth of Emmanuel is all about Jesus and his presence with us not just 2,000 years ago, but today as well. Let’s read.

**READ**

I don’t know if you have been following what is happening in the Middle East. Egypt with its elections in the midst of violence. Syria with its very conflicted state and so much carnage as people seem to be killed on the streets and indiscriminately. You know, when we think of Christmas we think of a very peaceful bucolic scene. But that is not realistic.

The promise of the birth of Immanuel in Isaiah 7 and then the recounting of that birth and subsequent promise is told and reflected much more accurately in what is happening in the Middle East today. In the midst of violence and revolution babies are being born over there. So with the prophecy of Isaiah, things were messy politically, very messy.

The promise that we read in 9 is really a continuation of the promise in 7 which should sound familiar: “The young virgin is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel.” Now some people get hung up with the virgin birth because Isaiah says it is a young girl and Matthew says a virgin so they see a discrepancy. For me, Mary was a virgin, it is part of our Christian doctrine, and I have no doubt that God could and did make that happen.

But Isaiah 9 takes us away from the mother and whatever discussion we want to have about her and places the emphasis squarely back where it needs to be. “For unto us” a child is born. Isaiah doesn’t say unto me, he says unto us. All of a sudden the birth of this child has become personal. Nobody in this room can say the birth of Immanuel has nothing to do with me. Oh yes it does. Unto us a child is born.

There is so much we could cover in Isaiah, but we still have to get to Matthew and it’s communion Sunday so I’ve got to watch my time. But let’s be clear on what this promise in Isaiah entails. When Emmanuel, God with us, is born into us and born into our hearts, when Jesus becomes our God then there ought to be a very clear causative result.

He will establish and uphold peace. The result of Emmanuel, of God being with us is ultimately peace. That should be the end result. Chief of police in Palatka, he took us to task. This is your job churches, and you are not doing a good job. The presence of Emmanuel ought to lead to peace in our lives, peace in the church, peace in the nation, and peace on earth. As we sing every Sunday let there be peace on earth. But individualize it because you must.

The presence of Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us in our lives has to lead to peace in every aspect of our lives. This promise of peace was given in Isaiah in the midst of chaos and confusion so he knows what he was talking about.

Let’s look at Matthew which gives us some detail to the birth of Emmanuel, this Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, this Prince of Peace. Jesus was born in a very topsy-turvy conflicted even potentially tragic reality. There was nothing Hallmarky or Rockwellian about his birth.

Joseph, we hear, was a righteous dude. His fiancé was pregnant and he knew he wasn’t to blame. That’s a problem. According to Deuteronomy 22:23-27 he had a legal responsibility to take her back to her father so that he would bring her to the square where she would be publicly stoned to death. That wasn’t his choice, it was his legal duty. Just like reporting child abuse is not an option but a legal responsibility.

But, and not to compare to my previous example, Joseph makes a distinction between legality and morality. My whole 5 years in Russia every single day we had to make that decision. You see the law did not allow for Soup Kitchen, Medical Clinics, aiding the illegal immigrant, foreigners worshipping together in churches. Every single day for the last 5 years of my life I did something that was illegal and could potentially get me kicked out of the country.

The choice we made was between doing the legal thing, following the law, or doing the right thing, or moral thing. Joseph chose right thing. He had made his decision to divorce Mary quietly, to let her go without the whole stoning thing.

From Mary’s perspective she was terrified. I think our modern culture has a bit of a warped perspective on teen unwed pregnancies. When I was at my class reunion I saw Crystal whom I hadn’t seen in 25 years. We were pretty good friends because she was an incredible basketball player and we were in the same circles. Our sophomore year in high school she was pregnant, as a number of my classmates were in high school, and I remember talking to her about it.

I was shocked by her approach to her pregnancy. She told me how happy she was because now I get to have a little somebody who will love me, do what I say, and I can have this baby close to me all the time. There was no sense of this not being the right thing. The status symbol that it provided her was worth it all. It reminds me of the pregnancy pact that was taken in a Massachussets high school where 17 girls none older than 16 decided to get pregnant together.

I can assure you that was not the case with Mary. For Mary it was not a status symbol it was a death warrant. She was terrified. I wonder if you heard about that young woman in Afghanistan who is in jail because she refused to marry her rapist. That is the type of culture in which Mary finds herself. It was a harsh culture and a lot of uncertainty in which to have a child.

Again, it is so tempting to focus on the reality of Mary and Joseph and what they were thinking and feeling, but it really is about God being with us, it is really about Emmanuel, today is about Jesus. The birth of Jesus in uncertain times is a constant reminder to us even in these uncertain times today, God is with us.

In Matthew 28 in the Great Commission do you know what his very last words to his disciples are? “Remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” That is what Emmanuel, Jesus’ birth means to us. He will always be with us.

But it also means something else that is its converse partner. Not only is God with us, but God is with all of us, regardless of who we are. Mother Theresa once said in relation to those she literally pulled out of the gutter, she said she saw Jesus when she looked in their eyes. “They are Jesus. Everyone is Jesus in a distressing disguise.” She knew when she was holding a starved, dying, and sick child, she was actually holding Jesus Christ in her arms.

The birth of Emmanuel, God with us, the birth of Jesus allows us to reach out to our neighbor. Let me change that. Emmanuel requires, demands that we reach out to our neighbor. With us is God on the streets of Lancaster. With us in God as we participate in Santa’s helpers. There are so many different ways in which we are called to reach out to Emmanuel in our community as we find God with us and around us. Let’s make sure that we do that this Christmas time. Amen.