

Immanuel

The Rev. Dr.
E. Stanley Ott

Isaiah 7:14

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

*Where does
God fit in?*

I love this season of Advent, the season of preparation and expectation of the celebration of the birth of Jesus on Christmas Day. The music of Christmas, the spirit of Christmas and, above all, the Good News of Jesus at Christmas all combine to make it a most wonderful time of the year.

There are certainly a great many amusing things about Christmas worth remembering and celebrating. Like the letter to one of those helpful hint columns, "Dear Elly, Where can I buy aluminum Christmas-tree needles to spread on the carpet under my aluminum Christmas tree? I want it to look natural, as if they'd fallen off the tree in the old fashion way." Signed, of course, "Sentimental." The answer is even better than the question. "Dear Sentimental: They aren't available right now, but a satisfactory sub-stitute is to buy a few branches of natural evergreen, allow the needles to dry and fall off, and then spray them with aluminum paint. They look like the real thing!"¹

Then there was the school teacher in England who tells of the time that she supervised the construction of a manger scene in the corner of her classroom. It was all there—the wise men and the shepherds, Mary and Joseph, the manger and the baby, the sheep

and the oxen and various other animals. It fascinated the children, one child especially. The teacher asked this little ten-year-old, "What is it? Why are you so taken with the manger scene? Is there something that bothers you?" With eyes still glued to the manger scene, the young child asked, "What I'd like to know is: Where does God fit in?"²

That's a great question isn't it? Where **does** God fit in? In our present day, the Christmas season may involve extra social activities, family gatherings, Christmas concerts, special events at church, school and office, house decorating and gift buying. We take all of these things and cram them into an already over-busy life. To make matters even more complex, this year we know that we are enmeshed in a very uncertain world. There is a lot going on. Perhaps too much is going on. We, too, can rightly ask, "Where does God fit in—where does Jesus fit in?" At this point in the season, we can be so conscious of the crush of things yet to be done to "get ready for Christmas" that our minds are trying to go in a million directions, none of which are getting our spirits ready for Christmas. Dick Halverson used to say we have to get our minds ready to meet Jesus. Jesus said, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20). So, Dick would say we have to make a

***Getting ready
for Christmas
most truly
is...remember-
ing where
Jesus fits in is
everywhere.***

mental adjustment and choose to become aware that Jesus has entered the room. He has come in the front door and has made his way through the Narthex, the entry lobby, made his way down the aisle and seats himself with warmth and joy on his face among those already sitting here. Getting ready for Christmas most truly is recovering that mental awareness of the presence of Jesus in this sanctuary, in your home, and in your personal life—it's remembering where Jesus fits in is everywhere.

God, Himself, answered the question, "Where does Jesus fit in?" many hundreds of years before Jesus was born through a prophecy given to the prophet Isaiah. The people of God were in a very tough place and, in the midst of their crisis, Isaiah offered this word of promise to King Ahaz: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14). Later, that verse was translated from Hebrew into Greek in the version of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint, and it was that translation that we read in the famous story of the birth of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. ²⁰...an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their

sins.'" ²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet [Isaiah]: ²³"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us" (Matthew 1:20b-23).

I don't think there is a lovelier word in the entire Bible than the name God gave to his son, the name Immanuel. Immanuel is a word made of three Hebrew words, Im-with, Anu-us, El-God. With-us God. Where does God fit into all of the stuff going on in our lives? With us. With us at a level so deep you cannot begin to imagine it. As Albert Day put it, "He is closer to our minds every moment than our own thoughts. He is nearer to our hearts than our own feelings. He is more intimate with our wills than our most vigorous decisions. If we are not aware of him, it is not because he is not with us."

When Mary and Joseph named their baby, names meant something to Jewish parents. The name David means Blessed. The name Isaac means Laughter, as he was born to very old Abraham and Sarah. I talked last week with a friend who has a twenty-year-old and two teenagers. They adopted an infant and, because he and his wife are getting along in years, they chose to name their son with the same name the aged Abraham and Sarah named their son: Isaac. Laughter! The infant born to Mary could have been named any number of things. Call him faith. Call him grace. Call him love. Yet, out of all the possible names he was named "Immanuel,"

***You holding on
to God's hand,
God holding on
to your hand.
With you—no
matter what.***

he was named with a preposition. His name is With – God with – so that we would understand the nature and character and behavior and lifestyle of our God. He is the with-God.

I remember when our son Lee and I were in Japan a few years ago that we visited a Shinto Shrine. The Japanese following the Shinto religion worship what they believe to be the spirits of nature and of past heroes. In front of the shrine was a rope, maybe three inches thick, that went from eye level up to a bell mounted on the ceiling overhead. We asked Rob Gill, our guide, what the rope and bell were for. He said the Shinto belief was that you had to ring the bell to “wake the god” – to “wake the spirit.” Not so with our God, the Lord who never sleeps. Psalm 121: I lift up my eyes to the hills— from where will my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. Our God is always alert. He is not the who is “up there” God but the “right here” God, right now, Immanuel. Dale Bruner writes that, “In [ancient] Israel, God was supremely the Above-Us God though he often visited us here below. The glory of the New Testament is that the great Above- Us God came down and became one of us.”³ Immanuel. Jesus is literally the With-Us God.

What is your earliest memory of someone being with you? I remember when I was two- or

three-years-old and my mother was sitting next to me—the “Immanu-Mom”— the with-us Mom! At around the same age, I came down with some awful bug. I have no idea today what it was but boy, was I a sick puppy. Hot, feverish, felt terrible, and I couldn't sleep. I vividly remember Dad pulling up a chair by my bed, giving me his hand and me grasping his thumb. My entire hand fit around his thumb. And there Dad sat—all night. Me, in and out of it, hot, thirsty, dozing on and off, and always, when I became conscious of my surroundings, there was Dad, my hand around his thumb. All night. It was a profound experience of Dad with me. The Immanu-Dad! The memory of it encourages me to this day. That is all that Immanuel is all about. “My sheep hear my voice,” said Jesus, “I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.”

God is with you. You holding on to God's hand, God holding on to your hand. With you—no matter what. I will never leave you, I will never forsake you, said Jesus. Are you in a particularly positive time in life? Good health, loved ones, work, energy, a sense of future? Jesus is with you. Are you in a particularly difficult time? Illness, loss of a loved one, loss of a job, anxious concern for a child or a mom or a dad or a friend or finances. Feeling depressed, suicidal, uptight, confused, needing a break? Jesus is with

***Immanuel, the
with us—with
you—God!***

you. Immanuel, the with us—with you—God!

Several years ago, *Sport Illustrated* magazine carried a marvelous story about Don Shula, coach of the Miami Dolphins. When Shula was playing football in college, his roommate was another player, Carl Taseff. Don and Carl played together in college, then went on to play ten years together with the Baltimore Colts. Continuing as roommates, they were close friends. Finally Don left the Colts, and the two friends were separated. Soon afterward, Carl was involved in a terrible accident. His nose was crushed, he was unconscious for three weeks, he lost fifty pounds, and his life hung in the balance. As Carl began to regain consciousness, he became aware through blurry vision of a figure kneeling in his room praying. The person was Don Shula. Don was “with” Carl.⁴ It is the picture of Jesus with you, no matter what is going on in your life. In the good moments and in the rough moments, the Lord Jesus is with you—the with-us God.

Yesterday, there was a memorial service at the National Presbyterian Church for Louis Evans, Jr., who was their wonderful pastor preacher for eighteen years and had a real influence on me at a certain point in my life. At one point in the memorial, his daughter, Andie Evans, now Goodrich, began to talk about what happened when her dad came to National. She said, “I was a junior in High School, and that’s a rough time in

life to find yourself having to move to a new city.” And she was going to a school where she didn’t know anybody and it was tough. “I found a corner of the house, and I was just weeping and I was a mess. Somehow my dad sensed that something was going on and he found me. I suppose he offered me words of comfort. I don’t even remember what he said. But then my dad sat down next to me, and he had me sit in his lap and my father just cried with me.” Now Louis Evans, Jr., was a man’s man, but he was with her in the most marvelous sense that Jesus is with you and me. Immanuel, God with us. God with you!

I want you to imagine, for a moment, that it’s Christmas day. You are having family members and/or friends for dinner, and preparations for Christmas dinner are almost finished. The table is set, the food is nearly ready and the doorbell rings. Someone you know from the church is at the door, although not among your closest friends. You assume this visitor is dropping something off when, to your surprise, your visitor says, “I’ve come to have dinner with you.” And before you can even open your mouth, the visitor slips by you into your home, hands coat and hat to you and, while you’re standing there somewhat confused holding the coat, your visitor goes into the kitchen and strikes up a conversation with whoever is in there. Pretty soon everyone gets the picture: “I guess the visitor is staying for supper.”

An extra place is set at the table, a hurried addition or two to stretch the menu and before you know it,

There is nothing you can do to earn God's love and nothing you can do to lose it. God loves you. Period!

you are eating together. Your guest asks to offer the table prayer and, in the prayer, asks for the power and love and presence of Almighty God to bless your home, to enliven each of the people in your home, praying for each one by name, praying for your health, your work, your joy and your faith. After the "Amen," you begin the meal, and you feel like you've already been fed. Jesus loved to do that. A sort of reverse hospitality. He just dropped in on folks unannounced. Not "us with God" but God with us. Not simply you seeking God but God seeking you. Not you inviting Jesus in but Jesus inviting himself in. "Behold, I stand at the door [of your life] and knock," he says. All you have to do is open the door. This is the God who comes to you.

God has always let us know that He is a "with" God. To Moses, "Go, for I will be with you." Through the prophet Isaiah, "When you pass through the waters [the tough moments] I will be with you." Psalm 23, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley...you are with me." Psalm 46, "The Lord of hosts is with us." Psalm 139, "If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there." There is nothing you can do to earn God's love and nothing you can do to lose it. God loves you. Period! God is with you. Now! Always! Many people and prophets have come in the name of the Lord, have spoken in God's name and acted on God's behalf, but none of them could even begin to measure

up to Immanuel, to literally being the with-us GOD until Jesus came. Jesus Christ is God, the with-us God, so that you may make that mental adjustment to become aware of his presence with you right now.

The person who first told me about Jesus Christ and whom I credit with being my true spiritual father is Andre Kole. He is a wonderful magician/illusionist and an evangelist. Andre's first wife, Aljeana, began to experience a strange dizziness, which turned out to be a brain tumor. She was to live two more years. During her final weeks, Aljeana was greatly comforted by the Psalms and found herself thinking more and more about heaven with a greater and greater sense of joy. She often said, "We would not long for heaven, if earth held our only joy." She was a beautiful woman who lost the use of her arms and her legs. She became blind. She lost her hair. All she could do was lie there day after day. She knew that God heals all of his children, some in this life, others in the life to come, and she was often seen smiling and saying, "Oh, God is so good to me." She loved the God who loved and who still loves her.

"She eventually slipped into a coma. The end was near. The doctor tried one last bit of surgery and she made a remarkable recovery for a few days. When she came out of her coma, one of the first things Aljeana said was, "Who was the man who was with me all the time?" She explained that a young man stood by her bed and never left her during the critical days through which she had

***His name is
Immanuel, God
with us. He is
always with
you. It is his
nature and his
heart.***

just come. In her words, “He seemed to have a special feeling for me, and when the pain was very bad, he held my hand and comforted me. I don’t think I could have made it without him.” When Andre Kole asked her if the man was still there, she said, “No, he left yesterday morning”—the time when she began to recover. That very day, the Koles received a card in the mail with the words of the Apostle Paul, “The Lord stood with me, and strengthened me.”⁵ Ours is the with-God. How can you know that the Lord will stand with you no matter what is going on in your life? His name is Immanuel, God with us. He is always with you. It is his nature and his heart.

In the words of the song
Immanuel by Michael Card:

So what will be your answer?
Will you hear the call?

Of him who did not spare his
son but gave Him for us all

On earth there is no power
there is no depth or height

That could ever separate us
from the love of God in Christ

Immanuel our God is with us
And if God is with us who
could stand against us

Our God is with us
Immanuel⁶

© 2008 E. Stanley Ott, Vienna Presbyterian Church,
Vienna, Virginia
Scripture from the NRSV.

¹ King Duncan & Angela Akers. Amusing Grace (Knoxville: Seven Worlds 1996) p. 348.

² Ibid. P. 349.

³ Dale Bruner, The Christbook Matthew 1-12, Eerdmans.

⁴ E. Stanley Ott, The Joy of Discipling (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1989), pp./ 35-36.

⁵ Andre Kole. Miracles or Magic? (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers 1984), Chapter 12.

⁶ Michael Card 1977 © Birdwing ©Mole End Sparrow Records

