

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
December 24, 2019

The Name Says It All

Matthew 1:18-25

Tonight, as the offering plates were brought forward, we sang what we've been singing for several Sundays: "Emmanuel, Emmanuel, His name is called Emmanuel; / God with us, revealed in us; / His name is called Emmanuel." In one sense, this Christmas Eve service is the culmination of all that we've been doing in the life of our congregation over the past month. All the singing, praying, and preaching. All the practicing, rehearsing, and presenting. All the decorating, eating, and giving. It all comes down to a name, and what that name means in the life of God's people, and to the life of the world. Emmanuel.

You may see the name spelled in slightly different ways. The spelling Immanuel is the customary way to transliterate the Hebrew word in the Old Testament. The spelling Emmanuel is the customary way to transliterate the Greek word in the New Testament. In some cases, it's spelled with just one "m," Emanuel. The bottom line is that whether you use "E" or "I," or seven letters or eight, this is how followers of Jesus spell Christmas: Emmanuel.

There's a lot packed into that name. But then again, at this time of the year, we're experts at packing a lot into a little, particularly if you're the type of person who waits until Christmas is almost here to do a lot of your preparation. Maybe you spent the past few days trying to do what some people do over the course of a few weeks. And yet, whether you're a procrastinator or a planner, you may find that by the time you arrive at Christmas Eve, the toll on yourself is much the same. You're exhausted. When I look out at the congregation on this night each year, I see those fatigued faces. I see what happens when we try to pack a lot into a little.

Sometimes we treat the meaning of Christmas in the same way. We try to squeeze a hefty portion of meaning into a single word, or a small set of words. The result? Christmas slogans, our annual attempt to condense the significance of the season into a memorable, repeatable nugget of truth and wisdom. Some slogans are more religiously focused. Jesus is the reason for the season. Keep Christ in Christmas. Other slogans are designed to be more broadly appealing. If you don't believe, you won't receive. Christmas in the heart puts Christmas in the air. And other slogans just aim to spread some humor. Dear Santa, Define Good. Don't get your tinsel in a tangle.

Part of our purpose tonight is to take the deep and enduring things we believe about Christ's birth and disentangle them from the cultural tinsel that provides a lot of holiday shine but not necessarily a lot of staying power. Seasonal slogans come and go. But the name of the one who has come, and has promised to come again, abides. Remember that we're people who also sing, "O come, O come, Emmanuel, / And ransom captive Israel, / That mourns in lonely exile here, / Until the Son of God appear." As we remember his first appearing, and wait actively and expectantly for his final appearing, we have another opportunity here tonight to unpack some of what's contained in the name that means "God with us."

In tonight's text, Matthew draws upon a promise that the prophet Isaiah made centuries earlier. Isaiah issued this declaration of hope in the midst of conflict. Syria and Israel had attacked Judah. Jerusalem and the royal family were under siege. But Isaiah foresaw a new era to come. And Matthew sees that new era as a present reality through the arrival of Jesus. His birth is the sign of God's presence, "God with us."

In a Jewish context, naming was no light or casual matter. A name was more than just a way of labeling someone, so as to be able to distinguish that person from others. A name was intended to convey something about who that person is. You didn't just use a name to identify someone. You used a name to define someone, to capture the essence of their being.

So to speak of Jesus as Emmanuel is to say that God is with us, and that Jesus is God's way of being with us, which means that God's way of being with us is very personal and deeply relational. God is not with us primarily through a body of knowledge, or a set of data, that we can download into our lives. God is not with us primarily through a written text or a body of tradition, though our Scriptures and the beliefs to which we hold are critical to our faith. God is not with us primarily through an inner experience that gives us special insight into complex divine mysteries. Rather, God is with us in and through the person of Jesus. So if we want to know who God is, and what God is doing in the world and in our lives, we have to know Jesus. That's one of the reasons why Matthew tells us about the birth of the person named Jesus, whose name itself means "the Lord saves."

Several years ago, a Christian magazine asked pastors, theologians, and others to answer the question, "What's the gospel in seven words?" One person wrote, "God refuses to be God without us." Since he and other respondents were invited to expand on their answer in a few sentences, he went on to say, "We asked God to say something definite and God, getting personal, sent Jesus Christ."¹ As he went on to emphasize, God isn't a collection of high-sounding theological abstractions, but rather a God whose will and purpose are embodied in the suffering, self-emptying love of Jesus Christ, the love of God for us.

As we follow Matthew's story from the birth of Jesus forward into his life and ministry, his death and resurrection, and the promise of his return, part of what we see is that the definition of "us" is expansive rather than restrictive. Though "us" was originally a reference to God's people Israel, Jesus shows us that Israel's purpose was to be a light to the world. So in Jesus' preaching, teaching, and ministry, he's constantly taking the good news of God's reign beyond traditional religious boundaries, and incorporating others, especially those on the margins of society, into the life of God's people.

This means that "God with us" drives us toward inclusion rather than exclusion. If you want to see "God with us" in action, just recall all the stops we've made in our mission moments this month, including tonight's video about ministry among immigrants who have been spilling out of Venezuela and into Colombia at the rate of about 5,000 a day. In total, more than 3 million have left their homes in hopes of escaping hunger, crime, unemployment, and lack of medical care. Here is a situation where Colombian believers and our missionaries who are serving there have an opportunity to reach out and bring in, in the name of Christ, and to reveal what "God with us" actually means on the ground, in this world where God has come to save. And by your giving and your praying, you also participate in proclaiming Emmanuel, "God with us."

This is a crucial thing for us to be doing, especially in our day and time when we're quick to draw lines between those who are on our side and those who must therefore be enemies. In that kind of atmosphere, it's easy for the truth that God is with us to get twisted,

distorted, and misused to communicate that if God is with us, then he must not be with you. Or even more so, if God is with us, then he must be against you. During World War II, when Hitler's army invaded Russia, German soldiers wore belt buckles inscribed with the words, "Gott mit uns." God with us. Rather than being news of God's good will toward the world, Emmanuel got co-opted and became a battle cry, a call to defeat enemies.

But what we see in Jesus Christ is that God with us is an announcement of peace not a declaration of war. As Paul reminds us, "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them" (2 Cor. 5:19a). God, out of his love for us, comes to us in our estrangement and hostility toward him, and reconciles us to himself. In Christ, most of all his death on the cross, God forgives us and makes us new. As Matthew stresses, Jesus is God's way of saving us from our sins. If there's going to be God with us and us with God, then this is what it takes.

And when you become reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ, you become part of a community that Jesus has gathered, a community called the church. One of this community's assignments is to be an embodiment of the name Emmanuel. In other words, to be an unambiguous sign to the world that God is with us, a living display of reconciliation at work.

Every church is an Emmanuel church. In fact, many congregations have Emmanuel as part of their name. One congregation stands out for the way it has lived up to its name. In 2015, members of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina had gathered for prayer, when a 21-year-old white supremacist named Dylan Roof, started shooting. It was the nation's deadliest racially motivated mass shooting at a place of worship. Nine Christians were killed.

Earlier this year, four years to the day of the massacre, a documentary film opened that tells the story of the victims. The film uses interviews with survivors, as well as families of the victims, to examine the societal effects of racism, as well as the victims' loved ones' incredible acts of forgiveness toward the shooter. According to director Brian Ivie, the film isn't just about racism, but about grace. He says, "It's a story of a group of people who decided they were going to bear the full weight of the wrong and still wish good upon the wrongdoer. That is the highest form of love possible, a love that Jesus Christ perfected."² The name of the film? *Emanuel*.

Tonight we've sung once again: "Emmanuel, Emmanuel, His name is called Emmanuel; / God with us, revealed in us; / His name is called Emmanuel." May each of us, and our congregation as a whole, live up to that name, so the world will know that God is with us.

¹ William H. Willimon, "God Refuses to Be God Without Us." The Christian Century website. November 4, 2011. Accessed December 22, 2019 <<https://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2011-11/god-refuses-be-god-without-us>>.

² Josh M. Shepherd, "What This Charleston Massacre Documentary Wants to Tell Us About Forgiveness." Christianity Today website. June 14, 2019. Accessed December 24, 2019 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/june-web-only/emmanuel-charleston-documentary-racial-justice-forgiveness.html>>.