

“A Story of God with Us”

*“By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us,
guard the good deposit entrusted to you” (II Timothy 1:14).*

In 1867, St. Paul’s Lutheran Church took a courageous leap of faith. Fort Wayne was growing rapidly. In fact, from 1860 to 1867, the population exploded from 10,000 to nearly 20,000 people. And, as the city grew, the members of St. Paul’s decided that they needed to plant a new church on the west end of Fort Wayne. To form the new congregation, St. Paul’s amazingly divided their own. The 211 voting members who lived on the east side of Harrison Street would remain at St. Paul, while 196 members living on the west side of Harrison would constitute the new congregation. With this understanding, the new church was officially founded on July 26, 1867, and Rev. Wolfgang Stubnazi was called as their pastor.

Now that the church had been formed, the charter members were faced with the task of naming their new congregation. Today, people come up with all kinds of interesting titles for churches. In fact, some could just as easily be used as a new brand name for a laundry detergent or energy drink – names like Rise, Renew, or Revive (those are real churches by the way). Other people pick names that identify their church by its location, like County Line Church of God, Blackhawk Baptist, or Broadway Christian. I would love to have been a fly on the wall when St. Paul’s debated the merits of names like West End or River’s Edge Lutheran Church.

All joking aside, the truth is, names matter. And I’m sure they had a spirited discussion as they met in August of 1867 to name the new church. And here, I think it’s helpful to pause and consider the times in which our ecclesiastical ancestors lived. In addition to the rapid growth of the city, Fort Wayne, in 1867, was still reeling from the impact of the Civil War. At the start of the war, in 1861, Fort Wayne had just over 10,000 residents, and in the four years that followed, the city sent 4,103 men to serve in the Union Army. Think about that. Every single family in Fort Wayne had made sacrifices, and many had experienced loss. And then, within days of General Lee’s surrender in 1865, President Lincoln was assassinated. At the same time, inflation was spiraling out of control, and by 1867, the country was experiencing scandals at the highest levels of government.

We think the times are crazy now, but we’ve got nothing on 1867. And it was in this era of uncertainty and confusion that our forebearers gathered to name their new church. For these men and women, the stakes were very high, and the name of the congregation needed to be more than a sexy brand name or a simple geographic marker. This name needed to be a confession of faith and an unmistakable reminder of God’s promises, and with the gravity of their situation in mind, they named their church “Emmanuel” – God with Us.

“Emmanuel” is a name pulled from the pages of Scripture and filled with meaning. First used in Isaiah 7, the name “Emmanuel” recalls a time before the Fall when God was with His people in perfection, and it also points to a perfect future where He promises to be with us forever. It is a name that connotes God’s temporal provision and His eternal protection, and, no matter what this world may throw at us, the name “Emmanuel” reminds us that God is with us. Of all that we’ve been given by those who’ve gone before, this name may matter most. Not only does “Emmanuel”

ground us in God's promise, but it also propels our ministry and allows us to see with eyes of faith the role we have to play in a desperate and dying world. And this has always been the case.

In fact, today's Old Testament reading from Habakkuk hits close to home as the prophet describes a world where, "Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise; (where) the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. (Where) the wicked surround the righteous; (and) justice goes forth perverted" (Habakkuk 1:3-4). Sound familiar?

This ancient complaint bears a chilling resemblance to our world today, and yet, nearly 700 years later, nothing seems to have changed as Paul paints a similar picture, warning Timothy, "that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power" (II Timothy 2:1-5).

It's eerily easy to see how these words from St. Paul describe our own times. Yet, the sins we so quickly condemn in others also reside in us. It doesn't take long to look at Paul's list and see a chilling reflection of our own sinful hearts. Whether it's the love of money or a lack of self-control, a heartless response to the hurting, or a denial of God's power, we all stand convicted of the sin we see in the world, and it's because of this undeniable and damning truth that "Emmanuel" actually matters, because, you see, the same God that is with us, is also the God who for us.

This is Paul's message to his protégé in today's text as he proclaims to Timothy, "Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord...who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light" (II Timothy 1:8-10).

The story of "God with Us" was first told to Timothy by a believing grandmother and faithful mother who spoke the Gospel and proclaimed to Timothy words of life. Timothy received a legacy of faith, grounded in grace, from those who went before, and today, that same gift is ours.

Since 1867, Emmanuel has taken courageous steps to proclaim the message of God's love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ, and now this calling is ours. Today, we stand on the shoulders of men and women who, in the midst of a chaotic and conflicted world, bound themselves to the promise of God's presence in Christ Jesus. In 1867, this good deposit was made in faith, and over the generations it has been passed down for us to guard and to give as freely as we have received, and when we do this Gospel work, it will not return empty.

Today, our God, our help in ages past, speaks hope for years to come, and this hope is in the name "Emmanuel," because this is the place where God is always with us and for us in Christ. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God's people say, "Amen."

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