

The CITYGATES C H U R C H

Christmas 2023 Immanuel – God with Us

Summary: When we could not go to God, He came to us and gave a priceless gift

Back in November Pastor Vic asked if we would consider pulling together a service for the inmates at the jail where he serves. It would be their first Christmas service in four years due to Covid – Matt, Joshua, and Peter from our worship team would lead the music and I would be asked to preach the message.

It felt like both a sacred and a solemn opportunity – it would be a privilege to preach the transforming power of the gospel to inmates, but when we were done these men and women weren't going to finish their shopping, visit family, or drink egg nog, they were going back to their cells. So, what's the message of Christmas for them? What would I say?

This morning we sit in a beautiful sanctuary on nicely padded chairs, most of us surrounded by people we know and love, wearing our Christmas best. They sat on folding chairs in a converted gymnasium wearing jumpsuits that just so happened to be either green or red. No doubt there's a tremendous difference between their circumstances and ours. But the theme of the message I shared with them is the same as what I'll share with you this morning – trusting that a gospel strong enough to bring hope to an inmate this Christmas might also be able to do something for you.

But first, would you join me in prayer – for those who are not able to be with their families today, and that we, and they, might know and understand the true meaning of Christmas? Let's pray.

A common theme of Christmas is people coming together – celebrating, typically in someone's home, perhaps after a long trip to get there. People laugh and smile - there's a tree in the corner, lights everywhere, food on the table. That's the image, that's the ideal. But Christmas doesn't always work out that way for that everyone.



That's why amid all the fun and festive songs we hear each December, one stands out as mournful and sad. *I'll Be Home for Christmas* was first performed by Bing Crosby who sang in a deep, slow, haunting voice

I'll be home for Christmas
You can count on me
Please have snow and mistletoe
And presents by the tree

Christmas eve will find me
Where the love light gleams
I'll be home for Christmas
If only in my dreams

The song was written and recorded in 1943 during World War II when an estimated 16 million Americans were serving in the military, many of them in far away places like Europe and Asia – they would *not* be home for Christmas, except in their dreams. So, the War Department recorded the song on special albums to be played for the troops (known as V Discs or victory discs), and sent them around the world.



The song quickly became a popular hit.

Except in England. Following the recommendation of senior British military officials the BBC banned the song for the entire duration of the war - not because some general was a Grinch, but because they thought it was too depressing, reminding servicemembers of circumstances they couldn't change.

And you can see where they're coming from, right? It's a miserable feeling when you want to be somewhere else, and yet you just can't make it.

Obviously, that's true physically – we want to be in the room with the people we love during the holidays. But it's true emotionally and spiritually as well – we want to feel Christmas emotions like joy and peace, but sometimes we just can't get our heart or our thoughts to cooperate - *even if we're in the room with the people*, we're still in an emotional funk.

I bring all this up because I want to talk about one very special aspect of Christmas and what it means for us. I want you to know that Christmas is not really about us going, or being, anywhere. The true miracle of Christmas is that God came to us.

In the Bible, the book of Matthew tells of the life of Jesus. It begins with the miraculous circumstances surrounding His birth. And Matthew explains (as we heard read):

Matthew 1:22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 23 *“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us).*

Christmas is not, *primarily*, about getting to grandma's house or giving or getting the perfect gift. Christmas is not, *primarily*, about lights or trees or stockings. All of those things are fine, if you can have them, but all of those things rest on something else: the fact that Christ came to us, *and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which means, “God with us.”*

My friends, here's what that means: God is very, very, interested in you. That's why He came. God sees you. God knows you. He comes to you because He cares. You are His own special creation. You have value and meaning to Him. You are made in His image and He wants to have a relationship with you.

On the very first page of Scripture, we're told that

Genesis 1:27 ... God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

Do you know this? Do you understand this? Do you believe that *you are made in the image of God*?

Now, that doesn't make you God. It doesn't even make you special, because it's true of everyone – we are all made in the image of God. But it means you have value, you have worth, you have an eternal soul.

No matter where you are on Christmas Day, or who else shows up, or where you fall asleep on Christmas Eve, no matter what gifts you give or receive, deep down at the very bottom of your life, firmly established, is this one truth: *you are made in the image of God*. No one on earth gave that to you and no one can ever take it away.

Of course, that's true not only of you, it's true of everyone you meet. Everyone you see. Everyone you know. We are all made in the image of God.

The problem is, the image is broken, fractured, warped and twisted. Not everyone reminds you of God. And you don't remind them of Him either.

We know that. We know we're not perfect people. There's something wrong with each of us, some problem we're trying to solve or something we want other people to believe.

Different people try different answers. Maybe you try to show off your body. Maybe you try to show off how much you know. Maybe you try to buy stuff, have stuff, or wear stuff that makes you feel good and makes others notice.

We all have coping mechanisms to deal with the fact that we're not quite who or what we want to be, or the fact that other people don't see us or treat us the way we want.

But, **how did all this happen?** How did we get to the place where people who are *made in the image of God* feel so depressed, envious, empty, needy, and angry at times? And why do we feel so frustrated, disrespected, or unappreciated by other people *who are also made in the image of God*?

The answer, according to Scripture, is sin.

Instead of making God the center of our lives, we take center stage ourselves. Instead of allowing God to orchestrate and direct our lives, we try to run our own. And that creates two problems: we *do* things God says we shouldn't and we *don't do* the things He says we should.

Even when we try to do the right things, we discover they're really hard and we can't do them well enough or often enough, and then, when we try *not* to do the things we shouldn't, we find it equally difficult to resist and change.

Scripture explains the problem to us: yes, we are made in the image of God, but we're also dead in our trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1). We're like a **\$100 bill** crumpled up, stained, and thrown into a filthy sewer – it's still worth \$100, but no one's reaching out to grab it.

Except Jesus.

At Christmas, we celebrate the fact that Christ came to earth to save us. To reach down into the sewers for us. To rescue and renew us. To turn us from our sins.

He offers to forgive us for all the ways and all the times we have turned our back on God and tried to take His place; for all the times we said things or did things to other people that we should not have done; for all the times that we did not see the image of God in others or show them the image of God in us.

Friends, Christ comes at Christmas to forgive us for all of this and to give us new life.

The arrival of Jesus on earth and His mission to reach and save people are the culmination of something we find God doing throughout Scripture. It's something I have been praying that He will do for you today.

You see, I confess that though I do not know you all personally by name, I have been praying for you, actively, fervently, hoping and believing that God would do for you what He has done for me and countless others – that He would be your **Immanuel** – God with you.

Whether you need to meet Him for the first time or simply be encouraged by the reminder that *He is here with you now*, I have been praying that He would come to you, speak to you, convict, convince, and comfort you – that He would minister to you and your needs in a very real, personal, and undeniable way.

I've been praying that, because it's what we see all throughout Scripture - *God comes to people*, even to people who could not or would not come to Him, people in isolated and lonely circumstances, people in trouble, people who were not holy enough to enter heaven – because none of us are. God came to them *where they were* because He is **Immanuel – God with us**.

God appeared to men like Noah, Abraham, and Moses – men who were not looking for God. *He came to them* in remote places, changed their lives and then used them to shape the course of human history. He ministered to Joseph in an Egyptian jail. He came to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace. He sent His angel to shut the mouths of the lions for Daniel. He ministered to Jeremiah while he was in an isolation cell.

God showed up unannounced in the lives of Joseph and Mary and said this is what I'm doing with My Son – and here's what I'd like you to do in response.

After His death, burial, and resurrection, Jesus appeared to His disciples who had gathered to pray behind locked doors and said to those who did not believe what they were seeing, "Here, touch My wounds." He sent an angel to lead Peter out of jail and another to speak to Paul on a ship in the middle of a storm. Jesus appeared in resurrection glory to John on the prison island of Patmos and gave him the Revelation at the end of Scripture.

My point is: over and over and over again, throughout Scripture, throughout history, and throughout this room, God shows up in the lives of people. He comes to us, no matter where we are, what we've done, or what we're going through because He *is Immanuel, which means, God with us.*

And that's the point of Christmas – that's what we should *remember in December* and the rest of the year as well.

But you also need to know this: when God shows up in your life, He often brings one of two gifts – conviction or comfort.

He brings conviction over things we are doing wrong – the ways that we distort His image in us.

Every single person in this room knows what I'm talking about – you get that strong sense that *I shouldn't do this, or I shouldn't have done that.* You knew it was wrong, but you did it anyway, or you just weren't strong enough to stop yourself, so now there's regret, now there's shame, now something is broken and there's a mess.

Scripture says the Holy Spirit comes to us and talks to us about these things. And when He does, we can either shut Him out or listen up. We shut Him out when we make excuses for what we've done, or explain why it's really not that bad or that big of a deal, or why we were justified in doing it.

But if we will listen and agree, God will teach us to hate our sin – **not to hate ourselves**, because, remember, we are made in the image of God – but to hate the things we have done and the things that have been done to us that wrinkled us, stained us, and dragged the image of God in us through the sewers of life.

Conviction can be painful, but it *is* a gift, because, if we will respond to it the Holy Spirit then points us to Jesus who will reach down with holy hands, pick us up, wash us off, and press the wrinkles out. Jesus who will make the image of God in us come to life as we trust in Him.

That process has to happen once for everyone – we all need to confess our sins and ask Jesus to redeem, restore, and renew us. But then, once it has happened, we need to keep coming back, asking Him to straighten us out and dust us off again and again as we struggle

to live this new life that looks a little more each day like the God who made us and saved us and a little less like who and what we are on our own.

God's second gift is the gift of comfort. We said earlier that Jesus came on the first Christmas to be [Immanuel – God with us](#). When He returned to Heaven, He promised to send the Holy Spirit who is our Comforter today.

If you are born-again through Christ, the Holy Spirit is not only *alongside* you guiding and directing you, He is *inside* you prompting and empowering you to live the life God has for you.

I remember receiving a remote-control car one Christmas when I was a young boy. It was a cool one – a big blue monster truck with oversized wheels and suspension and I could imagine all the fun I would have playing with it – I could see it screaming across the dirt outside, whipping around corners and spraying dust. I could see it jumping over a ramp and landing with a bounce and then speeding off again. I was planning to put my GI Joes in it so they could conduct a mission.



There was only one problem – it needed batteries for both the truck and the remote control. There weren't any in the box and we didn't have any in the house and it was Christmas so there was no way to go get any. I had this cool new toy, but no way to really use it, so it sat off to the side and I tried to find something else to do.

Friends, Christmas reminds us that **God has come to us**, to offer a new life – a big blue monster truck of a life, or maybe a low, sleek, shiny Maclaren of a life, a big, pink Barbie jeep of a life – I don't know – but the point is He offers it to you, *and* He gives you the batteries for it: the Holy Spirit living in you.

God wants to make things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control come out of you. And He wants to give you supernatural spiritual gifts to do things, say things, and know things that do not come from you – they come from [Immanuel – which means, God with us](#), upon us, and inside of us.

That's what Christmas is about.

Not everyone can be home for Christmas, for some it's only in their dreams. But *wherever* you celebrate, *however* you celebrate, *whomever* you celebrate with – I hope you'll remember what it's really all about: [Immanuel – God coming to us](#), no matter where we are. And, that you will let Him in to revive, renew, and restore you this Christmas and in the coming year.

Let's pray.



Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

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- Have you ever spent Christmas away from home? Where were you and what was it like?
- Do you have any special Christmas traditions? What does it take for you to “feel” Christmas?
- In what ways have you experienced Immanuel, God with you? If someone were to ask you what this means, how to know you’re experiencing the presence of God, how would you respond?
- What does it mean to be made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27)?
 - How does knowing that you are made in the image of God establish a firm foundation of self-identity?
 - How should knowing that others are made in the image of God affect the way we look at, speak to, or act toward others?
- What are some ways that we distort the image of God in ourselves or that the world distorts it in us?
- How and when did God show up in your life and present Himself as Immanuel? Did you respond immediately?
 - How might the knowledge that God shows up repeatedly in difficult circumstances and remote locations be encouraging to you?
- How do you know when God is showing up with the gift of conviction in your life?
- How does God provide the batteries for the life He’s giving you? Where and how have you seen Him give you strength or produce change?
- Who can you pray for, that they will come to know, believe, and trust that God is calling them to Himself through Jesus?