

Christmas Carol Service

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[0 : 0 0] concerning Jesus Christ is, at its heart, not a call to behave, but a call to behold. The caricature of what it is to be a Christian often is this idea that it is a call to behave, to be a good person. That is what makes you a Christian, so we are told. But that is not the gospel. The gospel calls us, in the first instance, to behold, to behold the glory and majesty of God, to behold the love and grace of God as it finds its most wonderful expression in the person and work of God's own Son, Jesus Christ, the one born in Bethlehem.

And in the Christmas story, we are invited to behold. In the gospel of Matthew and in chapter one, the verses that we read a few moments ago, we read, behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us. We are invited to behold the one who was born of a virgin who would bear the name Emmanuel. And I want us to do that just for a brief moment this evening, to behold Jesus, and to do so as we consider the name the angel tells Joseph that the one to be born would bear, Emmanuel, God with us, God for us. Now, the meaning of the name is clear enough. It is a Hebrew name, and Matthew gives us the meaning or translation of the name,

Emmanuel, which means God with us. So, the literal meaning of this name is clear enough. But what does the name reveal? And I want to suggest five truths about ourselves and about God's saving purposes revealed or certainly suggested by this very suggestive name, Emmanuel, God with us. The first truth that I want to draw to your attention that is certainly suggested by this name is as follows, that the name, the name Emmanuel, presupposes a problem. The need for one sent by God, named God with us, suggests that without his coming and acting, man is without God, or at least far from God. Without Emmanuel, God is not with us. Or more solemnly, we might conclude that God is against us. Now, in fairness, the name by itself does not state this, but we know that this is precisely what the Bible presents as man's condition or predicament. In the words that we also find in Scripture, without God and without hope.

The Bible's explanation is that sin has driven us far from God. What is it that happened in the garden long ago? What happened in that paradise in which Adam and Eve enjoyed a permanent Emmanuel? Well, they disobeyed and were cast out from the presence of God. In Eden, they could declare, they could live, they could experience, God is with us. But outside, outside, their reality changed radically to God is not with us. What is it that the Apostle Paul says as he writes to the believers in Rome concerning not only Adam and Eve, but all of us, heirs of that first couple, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. The Apostle recognizes that all fall short. We all fall short, hard though we might try. And our sin, our disobedience, alienates us from God. God is not simply not with us. He is against us as our sin has made us enemies of God. And the name Emmanuel recognizes that this grave problem exists, but it also points to the one who is to provide a solution. So, Emmanuel then, first of all, is a name that presupposes a problem, but it also, and we must move on to this, it is a name that declares an intention in the face of man's rebellion and sin, in the light of the enmity that separates us from God and God from us. What is God's response? Does God observe this reality impassively? Does He simply sit back and let justice take its course? Does He look on in curiosity at the futile attempts of man to sort out his problem?

No, that is not what God does. The name Emmanuel declares God's intention. It is God's desire to seek out reconciliation. He wants to be our friend. He wants to bridge the gap. He wants to be Emmanuel, God with us, God for us. God does not want to be in conflict with us. And this name, Emmanuel, grants us the hope that what was lost in the garden can be recovered. There is hope. So, the name presupposes a problem. It declares an intention, but also, and at the very heart, really, of any name, is the name identifies a person. The name identifies a person. How will God secure this reconciliation?

[6 : 18] It's all very well to have the intention to secure reconciliation, but how will that intention become a reality? How will God bridge the gap? The incarnation, the enfleshment of Jesus demonstrates to us the radical manner in which God has achieved this stated intention. He has come to this world in the person of His Son. The divine intention of reconciliation, of friendship with an alienated humanity, has taken flesh in the person of Jesus, born of a virgin, a man, but not any man.

A fact confirmed by the nature of His conception, the Son of God and the Son of Man at one and the same time.

One person, two natures. His very person, a powerful visual aid that speaks of God's initiative, in coming to our encounter, a mysterious and irreversible union of God and man. Jesus is Emmanuel.

Jesus is God with us. He is the way by which we can enter into a new relationship of friendship with God. Indeed, He is the only way. Emmanuel, God with us, the name that identifies a person, but also a name that describes a new reality. With the birth of Jesus, God's plan is carried out.

The whole world finds itself in a new situation. God with us. God by our side. God close at hand. And let's be very clear. The name identifies Jesus. The one born in Bethlehem. The name identifies Jesus beyond any doubt as God. Not simply an emissary of God. Not simply a representative or a worthy ambassador of God, but God Himself in our midst. Mystery of mysteries yet.

[8 : 42] True. And this is no dream. This is no work of science fiction or religious fiction. This is the new reality established by the coming of Emmanuel, a God with us. But then finally, one further truth that is suggested or indicated by this name, that the angel tells Joseph that the one to be born is to be known by Emmanuel. The name constitutes a promise. As we remember the Christmas story, as we do even this evening, a reasonable, legitimate concern could emerge. We might think, well, yes, indeed, 2,000 years ago, God dwelt among us. The world experienced a new reality. God with us. God walking the dusty roads of Galilee. God eating with His disciples. God healing the multitudes. But now, such a long time has passed. And did Jesus not return home to heaven?

Are we not back to where we were with a distant God? Of course, that was the great fear of the disciples when Jesus spoke of returning to His Father. And in the face of those fears, Jesus gave them a promise. We read words that Jesus addressed to His disciples recorded for us in John's Gospel and in chapter 16. Listen to what Jesus said to His disciples then and that He says to us also now.

Now I am going to Him who sent me. I'm returning to my Father. Yet none of you ask me, where are you going? Because I have said these things. Because I have said these things, you are filled with grief. But I tell you the truth. It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you. But if I go, I will send Him to you.

Jesus promises His disciples that though He is returning to heaven, to His Father, He will send the one He names as the Counselor, the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, God's Spirit, God's Spirit sent to be with us, that the reality of God with us would not be a fleeting reality etched on the pages of history, but no, a permanent reality of God with us, of God for us, of God amongst us.

Emmanuel, God with us. God for us. Is Emmanuel your reality? God has come near. He continues to stretch out His hand of friendship. The way of reconciliation has been opened and continues open.

[11 : 42] But you have to grasp that stretched out His hand. You have to walk that way that He has set before you. How are we to do that?

Well, the path that we have been set to walk on that we might know and experience Emmanuel, God with us, is the path of repentance and faith, putting our trust in Jesus, the one who came to be our Savior.

And they shall call His name Emmanuel, which means God with us. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we...