

Immanuel Reflection

Delivered to the Post-College Fellowship at Blacknall Memorial Presbyterian Church, Durham NC.
Second Sunday of Advent, 2004.

Matt 1:20-23 states

An angel of the Lord appeared to [Joseph] in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins.” Now all this took place that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, “Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which translated means, “God with us.” (NASB, and so throughout)

Immanuel. “God with us.” What comes to mind when you hear that phrase? Perhaps awe or a sense of mystery. Perhaps comfort. Perhaps invincibility, the Romans idea that if God is for us, who can be against us. Perhaps hope. Perhaps you hear a message to strengthen your resolve in the face of impending adversity.

I think those ideas probably capture how King Ahaz understood the name Immanuel. Ahaz was the King of Judah in the time of the prophet Isaiah, and he was worried because two of the neighboring nations were planning to attack his country. Isaiah told the King not to worry about the impending attack and offered him a sign to prove that this word was from God:

the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin [probably “maiden” here] will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel. . . . For before the boy knows to refuse evil and choose good, the land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken. (Isa 7:13-16)

As I said, I imagine Ahaz understood Immanuel as a sign that God would protect and vindicate Judah against her enemies. So you can imagine his surprise when the Assyrian army that God had said he would use to judge those two enemy nations then began attacking Judah as well. As the Lord tells Isaiah shortly after the Immanuel prophecy,

[Assyria] will sweep on into Judah, it will overflow and pass through, It will reach even to the neck; And the spread of its wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel. Be broken, O peoples, and be shattered; And give ear, all remote places of the earth. Gird yourselves, yet be shattered; Gird yourselves, yet be shattered. Devise a plan but it will be thwarted; State a proposal, but it will not stand, For God is with us. (Isa 8:7-10)

That picture of Immanuel isn't quite so comforting. Here it becomes apparent that God is with his people, but he is with them in judgment. Ahaz certainly didn't appreciate this turn of events. When he got judgment instead of the vindication he felt he had been promised, he abandoned God completely and turned to idols for deliverance.

What went wrong? Immanuel was a sign, a parable that Ahaz failed to understand. "Before the boy knows to refuse evil and choose good, the land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken." This was not a word of comfort but of warning, a warning that the two nations would be destroyed before Ahaz and Judah had learned from their example that God's presence brings judgment on those who have not learned to reject evil and choose the good. Judah and her king were essentially judged for the same sin that the other two nations had committed, namely the failure to recognize God's holiness and kingship.

Our God is a holy and righteous God. His presence necessarily brings judgment against those who are not living in accordance with his rule. You see, as the Lord told Joshua outside of Jericho, he is not for us, he is not for his people, any more than he is against our enemies. God does not come to take our side in disputes. Rather, he invites us to join his side. Ahaz declined that invitation.

Immanuel. God with us. Matthew identifies Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah's Immanuel prophecy. You may have noticed that the passage in Isaiah isn't really predicting a future Savior. So why does Matthew identify Jesus as Immanuel? Because Jesus is the ultimate manifestation of God's presence among us. He is the ultimate parable.

Just like Isaiah, he comes preaching repentance and the kingdom of God. For the first 12 chapters of Matthew the crowds flock to him, thinking that the time had finally come when God would begin to vindicate his downtrodden people, to throw off the yoke of Roman oppression, to restore the kingdom to Israel. But the people didn't heed Jesus' warning to repent. And so, beginning with the parables in Matt 13, Jesus begins to pronounce judgment. Immanuel. God with us. Jesus turns out to be very different from what the crowds had expected. Like Ahaz, they fall away to the point where they eventually reject God by turning against his emissary.

Immanuel. God with us. What does that name mean for us today? What are we really doing when we sing and ask for Immanuel to come? Essentially we're asking God to bring his holy presence among sinful people, and that will always result in judgment. That's why judgment begins at the house of God.

But you know what? Judgment is a bad thing only if we are expecting unjustified vindication. Only if we are expecting preferential treatment as God's people. Only if we are expecting God to join our side.

If we instead understand the name Immanuel as a call to repentance,

If we understand our invitation for Immanuel to come as an invitation for God to bring
his refining fire,

If we can understand that, far from being a sign that God has abandoned us, judgment is
often the very sign that he is indeed with us,

then we will be able to persevere through the times of refining.

God's presence brings judgment, yes. But it also brings his power to sustain us in the midst of that judgment. And his judgment results in salvation for all who persevere. The more we allow his refining, the more of his presence we will enjoy.

The book of Matthew ends with Jesus' promise to his disciples that He will be with them always, even to the end of the age. What a glorious and sobering promise.

Immanuel. God with us.