

**Emmanuel - "God with Us"**

Isaiah 7:14 & Matthew 1:18-25

As we celebrate Jesus Christ's coming to the world this season, let us think about God's heart that sent His Son, Jesus, to us. Our life is a journey, one that we all have to take while we live here on earth. A journey means that there's a beginning and a final destination.

For our respective journeys, God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to accompany us so that we don't have to be alone. Through our companionship with Jesus, we can continually reflect his character and complete our journey according to God's plan for our salvation. This is why God is very passionate about His presence and companionship with us, as our stories with Jesus will be a part of God's grander story on earth.

**God's intentional companionship with His people has been very evident from the beginning.**

After creating a world that was perfect for human beings to live in, God showed his presence with them in the Garden of Eden.

**"Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden."** (Genesis 3:8 NIV)

How many laws do we have in the Old Testament? There are 613 distinct laws in the Old Testament. Why did God give the Israelites those laws? They were the ways for Israel to keep their Covenant relationship with God so that they could continually approach God, find their places in God, enjoy the presence of God, worship God, and have fellowship with God, which was their identity and power to live as God's Covenant people. So, we can say that those laws were given to them so they could experience the God of Emmanuel throughout their lives.

However, the Israelites were persistently and unruly rebellious against God, worshipping the pagan idols. God was so upset about their betrayal even though God warned them repeatedly through His prophets. Finally, God sent them into exile in Babylon, where pagan idols were everywhere. They rejected the God of Emmanuel, which meant they gave up their lives and identity as God's people. But God didn't. God went there together with them, crying over their sins and their following suffering. There are two important scriptures in the Old Testament about the God of Emmanuel, even among His rebellious people.

“If you do not listen, I will weep in secret because of your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly, overflowing with tears, because the Lord’s flock will be taken captive.” (Jeremiah 13:17 NIV)

“How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? ... My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I devastate Ephraim again. For I am God, and not a man— **the Holy One among you.**” (Hosea 11:8-9 NIV)

Today’s scripture, Isaiah 7:14, was given to King Ahaz of Judah when the nation worshipped idols. Even King Ahaz sacrificed his sons to idols (2 Chronicles 28:3). The nation was threatened by a coalition of the northern Kingdom of Israel and Syria (Aram). King Ahaz was seeking military support from the Assyrian Empire, not asking for God’s protection. In those kinds of religiously adulterated and politically dreadful situations, God gave this message, “**Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Emmanuel.**” (Isaiah 7:14 NRSV). It sounds like, “**My identity as the God of Emmanuel will be continued and ultimately fulfilled in my Son, Jesus Christ. Trust me. Nothing can frustrate my plan for my Kingdom and the salvation of my people. My love and my being Emmanuel is beyond what you are experiencing in your lives. Still, I am your God of Emmanuel. I am with you.**”

I love John Wesley and would love to take a trip to England to see the places of his ministries in the 18th century. Right before his passing, John Wesley left his final message. “**The best of all is God is with us.**” Even though the message was very simple, it was deeply powerful. It was his testimony of his unwavering faith and assurance of God’s love and presence in his life, even in the face of death.

Also, we must remember that Joseph did memorable acts to fulfill the message of Emmanuel in the story. Let us read these Scriptures on the screen together. “**Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means God is with us.**” (Matthew 1:19-23 NRSV).

I believe that the following scriptures after Matthew 1:23 give us a lesson on how we can reveal the message of Emmanuel - “God with us” - to the world.

“**When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife but had no marital relations with her until she had given birth to a son, and he named him Jesus.**” (Matthew 1:24-25 NRSV).

Joseph's obedience to God and His word allowed the message of God's presence with His people to be fulfilled in and through Jesus Christ. As we hold on to the message of Emmanuel, we must remember that we are called to be God's wonderful vehicle of Emmanuel as Joseph did.

The message of the God of Emmanuel reappears at the end of Matthew in the Great Commission: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20 NIV). In Matthew, the mission is about making disciples of all nations. As we faithfully obey the command of God's mission, we can experience and reveal Emmanuel to the very end of the age.

Let me share a story from Tony Campolo, who was a wonderful speaker, author, preacher, and sociologist. He passed away a month ago this year.

There was a school teacher named Jean Thomson. It was the first day of school. All the children came. She also talked about what teachers always say on the first day of school. "Boys and girls, I love you all the same." Sometimes, teachers lie. I don't know whether you have ever had a teacher who didn't like you - I have. And I know what it is like.

And there was a little boy in Jean Thomson's room that Jean Thomson did not like. You would not have liked him either. He sat slouched in his chair, and he never looked up. His clothes were musty and dirty, and he never bathed often enough to get rid of an unpleasant odor. And when she spoke to him, he answered in monosyllables of, "Yeh," "No." When she marked his paper, she always got a perverse delight out of putting X's next to the wrong answers, and when she put the "F" at the top of the paper, she always did it with a flair.

She should have known better. Teachers have records. She had records. She had records on Teddy Stollard. First Grade: Teddy is a good boy. He shows promise in his work and attitude but has a poor home situation. Second Grade: Teddy works hard at his schoolwork, but he is too serious for a second-grader. His mother is terminally ill. Third Grade: Teddy is becoming withdrawn and detached. His mother died this year. His father shows no interest. Fourth Grade: Teddy is a troubled child who needs help. He needs help very, very much. She had the records. She should have known.

At Christmas, the children bring presents to the teacher and pile them on her desk. And they were all on brightly colored paper - except for Teddy's present. His was wrapped in brown paper and held together with Scotch tape. But to tell the truth, she was surprised he even brought a present. When she tore open the paper, out fell a rhinestone bracelet with most of the stones missing and a bottle of cheap perfume that was almost empty. The other children began to giggle and

laugh. But Jean had enough sense to snap on the bracelet and put some perfume on her other wrist, and holding it up to the children, she said, "Isn't it lovely? Isn't it lovely?" Taking a cue from the teacher, they all agreed.

At the end of the day, when all the other children had left, Teddy lingered behind. And he came over to her desk, and he said softly, "Miss Thomson, Miss Thomson, all day today, you smelled just like my mother used to smell. That's her bracelet you're wearing. I'm glad you liked my presents." And slowly he turned and left, and she got down on her knees and buried her head in the chair, and cried, and cried, and asked God to forgive her.

And the next day when the children came, she was a new kind of teacher. She treated each child as Jesus would. She loved each child as Jesus would. She looked upon each child as Jesus would. She nurtured, she helped, she tutored, particularly little Teddy. She helped him along. By the end of that school year, he had caught up with a lot of children. He was even ahead of some.

She didn't hear from Teddy for a long time. Then, she got this note. "Dear Miss Thomson, I'm graduating from High School. I wanted you to be the first to know. Love, Teddy Stollard." Four years later, there was another note. "Dear Miss Thomson, I'm second in my class. I wanted you to be the first to know. The university has not been easy, but I enjoyed it. Love, Teddy Stollard."

Four years later, there was another note. "Dear Miss Thomson, As of today, I am Theodore J. Stollard, MD. How about that? I wanted you to be the first to know. I am going to be married on July 27th, to be exact. I want you to come, and I want you to sit where my mother would have sat. You are the only family I have now. Dad died last year." And she went - and she sat where a mother would have sat because she deserved to be there. She was a person who did what Jesus would have done. She embodied the message of Emmanuel, "God with us."

I love this story, especially during the Christmas season. Please spare time to think about God's loving presence in your lives this year. I don't know where you are at this stage of your life or what all your ups and downs are. But what we know for certain is that God is with us and will continually be with us like Teddy Stollard experienced. Also, let us remember that we are called to be God's warm presence for the people in our lives, like Jean Thomson in the story.

Our church has prepared [notes](#) for you to record your experiences of God's presence in your lives. Use it as a blessing note that can encourage and ascertain you whenever you need it. Also, "[You are not alone](#)," and "[God is with you](#)" cards that can remind you of the God of Emmanuel. We have a limited number of pocket prayer quilts, each with a small cross in them. Please pick them up in the lobby area at the back. Those are our small gifts for you. Let us remember that God came to us to be with us, to be our Emmanuel God, and we are to be the vehicle of God's loving presence for the people around us.