

# Immanuel – God With Us

Pastor Cliff Bergman - Pinawa Alliance Church

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Isaiah 7.14 Matthew 1.23

It is not surprising that there are growing numbers of reports about loneliness as people are isolated due to COVID-19 restrictions. People are experiencing a variety of mental health issues as the months go by. It is very understandable and predictable since God created us as social beings with a natural instinct and need for interaction with others – that is very simply part of our DNA.

Thus it is not unexpected that there is a steadily growing sense of loneliness and abandonment. That is more pronounced in long term care facilities, but it is also the case for those who live alone and are restricted from personal interaction with others. People desire, and need, companionship and interrelationship with others.

It is because we are made in the image of God that we are relational. While humankind's relationship with God and one another was fractured in the Fall of Adam and Eve we still crave relationships. It was to restore humankind's relationship with God that Jesus came to earth. A hint of His coming is found as early as Genesis 3.15. As history unfolded, the nature of the Redeemer and details of His coming became clearer through the many prophecies given. One such prophecy is the familiar one by the Prophet Isaiah found in:

**Isaiah 9:6–7** (ESV) 6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7 Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

He will be called *Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*, each title focusing on a different aspect of the Promised Messiah. When the Angel Gabriel visited Mary, he told her that the Son she would bear was to be named *Jesus* (Luk 1.31). Gabriel added that *He will be called the Son of the Most High* (1.32). The angel who appeared to Joseph in a dream reiterated that He was to be called, *Jesus*, and gave the reason for His coming, *for he will save his people from their sins* (Mt 1:21). In the birth announcement to the shepherds, the One born in the city of David was described as the *Savior, who is Christ the Lord* (Luk 2.11). Much can be said about all these titles and descriptions, but I want to turn your attention to another name found in the prophecy of Isaiah in:

**Isaiah 7:14** (ESV) Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name *Immanuel*.

In Matthew's narrative of the birth of Jesus, it is this particular prophecy from Isaiah that is described as being fulfilled with Jesus arrival.

**Matthew 1:22–23 (ESV)** 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).

This is a quality of our Redeemer we are especially appreciative of this year in light of the isolation and restrictions that have characterized 2020. The implications of COVID-19 on relationships and the interactions we have with people have been so widespread. When we meet a friend or neighbor outdoors we are naturally predisposed to move close to them to visit, and as we do, we remind ourselves we are to physically distance and step back. In the past we greeted cashiers and exchanged some pleasantries, but now standing between us and them is a sheet of Plexiglas. There are so many things that people have faced without a family member or friend nearby. Many of the visits and informal interactions we took for granted have been discontinued. Most of us have discovered Zoom in the past year and we are appreciative of it, but it just not the same. Not only have people faced trials and difficulties alone, but they have also been restricted from sharing special moments and milestones with others as well. Weddings planned to include many guests were downsized to 5 or 10. Birthday and anniversary celebrations were curtailed. The most heart wrenching have been people prevented from visiting seriously ill loved ones. Rather than friends and family being there as loved ones died, many have died alone. Funerals which would have been attended by dozens and in many cases hundreds, basically didn't happen at all and people are left without a very important component in experiencing comfort and processing their grief.

Throughout the past months and as we anticipate a new year where isolation will continue to be the norm for a while longer, we as followers of Jesus Christ have come to appreciate even more the importance of Jesus as *Immanuel – God with us*. This year, most of us have become more conscious of our need for Him alongside. Lest anyone misunderstands, I don't want to diminish the importance of family and friends caring for us, interacting with us, ministering to us, encouraging us, and so on; they are gifts from God sent to nurture our social need. However, when that isn't possible, or is restricted, or as we process the never ending news of the assault of COVID-19 and realize a little bit more the temporal nature of life and reflect on the possibility that our own death could be closer than we had thought, it elevates our need for assurance and support. Perhaps the quality we crave the most in times like these is *relationship*, the very thing that we are being deprived of.

We of course are not the first to face loneliness or feelings of abandonment. One can hardly imagine a time of greater loneliness or feelings of abandonment than following the crucifixion of Jesus. His disciples had spent the past 3 years with Him in the closest of fellowship. They were committed to Jesus' message of redemption and hope. But in the aftermath of the crucifixion they felt abandoned, their dreams for the future appeared to be shattered. They desperately needed reassurance and for someone to come alongside and tell them it would be OK. Jesus anticipated their need and told them in advance of His provisions for them. He began with the words, “*Let not your hearts be troubled*” (John

14.1). What lie ahead had all the potential to trouble them to the core of their being. That's one of the first things that happens to us when things aren't turning out as planned, or when things lie down the road we are apprehensive about – our hearts become troubled and fear begins to take over. The likelihood of that happening increases when we are alone and isolated from the support of family and friends.

## We Face a Choice

I usually quickly pass over the introductory words of John 14 without thinking about them very much, *Let not your hearts be troubled* (1). I generally move quickly to the exciting words which follow, but let us dwell on these words for a moment. Jesus repeated the same words in verse 27 at the conclusion of this section, *Let not your hearts be troubled*, and He added, *neither let them be afraid*. The point I want to draw to our attention is we are faced with a choice when we face unsettling and disruptive things in our lives. Jesus tells us how we should respond when things aren't unfolding the way we had thought or expected they would, or when people restrict us from doing what we want, *Let not your hearts be troubled*. The verb is an imperative, and it is something we need to decide – it is something we have a part in. We need to decide we will do all we can so our *hearts* are neither *troubled* nor *afraid*, that they are not *distressed*, or *disturbed*, or *agitated*. We face a choice, but it is far more than maintaining a stiff upper lip or impassioned resolve despite the circumstances. As is always the case in places where the Lord instructs us to do something, or not do something, we aren't left to our own resources, but it nevertheless does begin with a choice to turn to Him.

## Consider the Facts

There are reasons why we need not let our hearts be troubled. In John 14 Jesus addressed both the long term future of His disciples and us, as well as their immediate present.

### 1. Promise For the Future

Lest His disciples draw the wrong conclusions from Jesus' crucifixion and His return to heaven, Jesus described His preparations for the future of His followers. That includes you and me as well.

**John 14:2-3** (ESV) 2 In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.

Using the analogy of marriage preparations in 1<sup>st</sup> century Israel, Jesus pointed out He was going to prepare a place for them, just as a bridegroom would for his bride. Additionally, as a bridegroom would return for his bride when the place was ready, so too will Jesus. Even though He is not visibly present, be absolutely certain He will return when His Father decides the time has arrived. He will come again and gather all His children and they will enter into the most intimate of fellowship for eternity, which will be the ultimate experience of *God with us*.

## 2. Provisions for the Present

The certainty of our long term future should surely shape our perspective today, however, it doesn't fully enable us to victoriously deal with many things that concern us right now. Thus Jesus also addressed the present. Despite His physical absence, He wanted His disciples to know He hadn't abandoned them – He would not leave them as *orphans*. He would send His Spirit to dwell in them and concluded His promise to them with, *I will come to you*.

**John 14:17–18** (ESV) even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and **will be in you**. 18 **“I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.**

This is such an important point that Jesus reiterated the promise of His abiding presence in this section. Not only would He send the Holy Spirit to live in them, but He would do so as well (14.20), and additionally, so would the Father.

**John 14:23** (ESV) Jesus answered him, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and **we will come to him and make our home with him**.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit abiding in the follower of Jesus Christ is encompassed in, *Immanuel, God with us*.

We are all vulnerable to loneliness when we don't have someone to talk to or interact with about issues we are dealing with or which we anticipate down the road. We begin to envision the challenges we may face and become overwhelmed with meeting those challenges. We question how we will get through them. Who will I call if such and such happens? Who will look after this or that? What do I do when I don't know what to do? Who will be there to encourage me and provide affirmation when I am filled with apprehension and fear? Very simply, “*Who will come alongside of me?*” We all know Psalm 23, it is probably the most common Psalm read at funerals. The 4<sup>th</sup> verse is particularly pertinent,

**Psalm 23:4** (ESV) Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, **for you are with me**; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

Even when faced with imminent death I have no need to fear. Why? Because **Immanuel** is right there to comfort and care for me. He knows all about what I am going through and will respond accordingly. Consider the promise in,

**2 Corinthians 12:9** (ESV) But he said to me, “**My grace is sufficient for you**, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

God draws upon His inexhaustible supply of grace and lavishes it upon us. God will never allow anything to touch the lives of His children that is beyond His capacity to care for them. Thus we are told, *let not your hearts be troubled*, the One who is telling us is also promising to come alongside of us and sustain us as we journey through the very things that trouble our hearts. You may have lost a trusted friend, or someone who had usually been there to encourage you in troubling times can no longer. Friends and loved ones are so important and are God's gifts to us. Don't overlook though the importance and practical significance of having God with us; that relationship is particularly vital when we are alone.

And lest we mistakenly conclude God doesn't know what we are going through, or how afraid we are, or how lonely and isolated we feel, pause and turn to Psalm 139. God is always at your side, from the moment you believed the Gospel and placed your faith in Him as your Savior. It is then He restored that relationship fractured when Adam and Eve sinned. He made you spiritually alive and will abide with you until you breathe your last breath. If you haven't read Psalm 139 recently, it would be a good place to start if you feel lonely today or are fearful of the future. You don't need to read it all in one sitting, it may be more beneficial to read only a few verses at a time and reflect on what they mean and how the truths in them relate to you. Consider the first 6 verses:

**Psalm 139:1–6 (ESV)** 1 O LORD, you have searched me and known me! 2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. 3 You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. 4 Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether. 5 You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. 6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it.

The theme of these verses is the Lord knows us intimately; He knows everything about us. He knows us better than our most trusted friend. So much so that He knows our thoughts before we think them, He knows where we will go before we go there, and He knows what we will say before we say it. There is nothing that will enter our lives and surprise Him or which He did not anticipate or is beyond His ability to guide us through. Even if one of us should become one of those who faces death alone, the follower of Jesus can never be alone. He will be there as we *walk through the valley of the shadow of death*. Not only so, but the Word of God assures us of the presence of His angels, appointed by Him to minister to His saints, including while they labor for their last breath. God's angels will also stand ready to transport His children to heaven (Heb 1.14) where they will God face-to-face for eternity.

My friends, we are not given an empty promise to cling to or wishful thinking to merely fill our minds, but we are asked to hold tightly to a promise backed up by the God of this universe. But there is even more!

# The Indescribable Reality of God With Us

God not only tells us to choose to *not let your hearts be troubled* and not only has He made provisions to back up that exhortation, but in an indescribable manner He gives us peace and carries us through every experience. Paul in writing to the believers at Philippi referred to that when he instructed them, “do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” (Phil 4.6). As believers turn to the Lord in their times of trouble and trust in Him, “. . . the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4.7). Getting through trying times is far more than a resolve on our part. It is also more than knowing about God’s awareness of our need and His provisions. It is experiencing *God with us* through those trying times.

Jesus illustrated His awareness of us and what is happening in our lives with sparrows. This is what He said,

**Matthew 10:29–31** (ESV) 29 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. 30 But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. 31 Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

We are of far greater value to God than sparrows. God is with us – Immanuel!

## Conclusion

We are on the threshold of a new year. It is pretty much a certainty we will experience some troubling times and perhaps become fearful of what may lay ahead. Therefore we will have occasion to turn to the Lord and put into practice His admonition to us, *Let not your hearts be troubled*.

What are some practical things we can do in those situations? This is one of the reasons consistent reading and study of God’s Word is so important. In troubled times passages like Psalm 139, John 14, and Philippians 4 are good places to turn. Listening to songs, or if you are able, singing songs filled with truths from God’s Word are also catalysts for peace. When we are troubled we become disproportionately focused on ourselves and our plight. Turn that around a little bit and take a sheet of paper and list all of the reasons you have to be thankful. Consider too, places in the past where God has cared for you or your loved ones and gotten you, or them, through victoriously. Just as His grace was sufficient in the past so it will in the future. Remember, Immanuel, God With Us!

It seems fitting to conclude with the song, *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*. The 1<sup>st</sup> link is to a choir singing the traditional lyrics and the 2<sup>nd</sup> is by *Sovereign Grace* with some new lyrics.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKu0or0t8Uw&list=RDkKu0or0t8Uw&start\\_radio=1&t=0&ab\\_channel=ChetValleyChurches](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKu0or0t8Uw&list=RDkKu0or0t8Uw&start_radio=1&t=0&ab_channel=ChetValleyChurches)

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