



# river west church

God With Us

Matthew 1:18-25

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Today is December 18th, and you know what that means...its time for the annual "Christmas Sermon". This morning, we turn our focus to Matthew chapter 1 where we find one of the most meaningful titles for Jesus in all of scripture. But before we begin, a word of caution: one of the great challenges for Christians at Christmastime is the challenge of familiarity. Words and themes that for Matthew's original audience were "earth-shattering" or even scandalous, can become sentimental and nostalgic for us, and totally lose their impact. We have to fight this.

When Matthew wrote his Gospel account, people were still trying to wrap their heads around the reality of Jesus! His life and ministry were a huge surprise for them.

Although Jesus fulfilled ancient prophecies, He did not fulfill expectations. Matthew wrote to interpret all that had happened and to show how Jesus was God's Messiah, the fulfillment of all of God's good and glorious promises. And at the heart of Matthew's Christmas account we found an ancient prediction with an earth-shattering word.

## **Immanuel: Jesus is God**

The miracle of Christmas is that God came to be with us. Matthew tells us that the birth of Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel (which means, God with us)" (Matt. 1:23). Jesus is the very presence of God in our midst. God come near. Matthew translates the Hebrew word "Immanuel" so that his readers get the full impact. God with us. For a 1st century Jew, the notion of "Immanuel" would have been frightening, insulting, and strangely desirable all at the same time. Throughout their history, the nation of Israel had no greater longing than for God to be in their midst, to go with them. Yet, the people of God had come to understand that the presence of God was actually the most dangerous thing in the world. To come before a Holy God as an unholy sinner meant certain death (Ex. 33:20).

So, Matthew's announcement of Immanuel begs some questions. How can God come to be with an unholy people? And why would God come in the first place? (Not to mention that Matthew was claiming that this tiny baby who entered the world through scandalous circumstances was actually the uncreated creator of the universe!) Matthew answers these questions. Verse 21 tells us "She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." This is the good news of great joy for all the people! Jesus is not just God come to be with us, he is God come to save us! His coming is a rescue operation. Through Jesus, it is now safe to be near God. The Holy presence of the Almighty that used to kill people now brings them new, eternal life. But, there is more. Immanuel is a complete reversal of all religious expectations.

## **Immanuel: the great religious reversal**

This morning as we ponder and pray, we are going to discover that "Immanuel" is a complete reversal of typical religious thinking. Every religion in the world (and most "religious" people!) asks the question "How can I get close to God"? What do I need to do? What prayers or incantations must I recite? Where must I go: to the temple, to the forest, to the religious holy site? How do I need to change? What do I need to give up? The Gospel radically reverses all of that! In the Gospel we find the announcement that Jesus is Immanuel. God comes close to us. We don't get close to God. We can't! No matter how hard you try, how much you give up, discipline yourself, and no matter how far you travel, you will never get yourself closer to God. God comes to you.

If we really begin to get this, we will discover that it changes everything; the way we approach God in prayer and worship, the way we approach others in the family of God, even the way we approach our broken world. But most importantly, it should change our hearts. I know this morning that many have come who feel that God is distant, God is angry, God is a let-down, or perhaps even that God is ridiculous. My prayer for you is that today God will touch your heart through Jesus, our Immanuel.