

# ANTICIPATING IMMANUEL

SERIES: WITH



Catalog No. 20181202  
Matthew 1:18–25  
First Message  
Dan Westman  
December 2, 2018

*Matthew 1:18–25*

When I was growing up, my family had several Christmas traditions that anchored our celebrations every December 24th and 25th. On Christmas Eve morning, my dad would make us a delicious breakfast of Swedish pancakes with lingonberries, bacon, and donuts with vanilla frosting and sprinkles. After a late breakfast, we would start preparing food for a big dinner later that day—sometimes at our house or another relatives' house. At some point in the afternoon, we would take a break from the dinner preparations and go to our Christmas Eve service at church where our pastor would wear the same red sweater and read from a children's book that in some way illustrated the Christmas story. After church, we would come home and enjoy a huge meal. We might get a few presents from my grandparents or aunts and uncles, but the best presents always came the next morning, when we would get to open the gifts from my parents.

One Christmas Eve, when I was 11 years old, things were moving along like they always did. We had eaten our Swedish pancakes and donuts. We had gone to church and heard our pastor read a children's story while wearing his red Christmas sweater. We had come home and eaten a delicious meal with our extended family.

After everyone had gone home, my parents, my sisters, and I broke the routine. "We thought it would be fun to have you all open one of your presents tonight," my parents told us, and they handed each of us a similarly shaped box—the kind that looks like it might be for new clothes. What could it be? Was it actually clothes? That would be disappointing to an 11-year-old boy. Why would my parents want us to open this gift on Christmas Eve instead of waiting until the next morning as we always did?

My sisters and I opened the presents at the same time. As I opened the box, I was a little surprised. It was clothes, just like it looked. A sweatshirt actually. This gift was a little bit of a letdown, but it was a pretty cool sweatshirt—it had a big picture of Goofy on it—so I tried not to act disappointed. My sisters' sweatshirts also had Disney characters on them—Minnie Mouse I think.

"Thanks, Mom and Dad," we all said. "Wait, there's more in there," they said. When we looked back in the boxes, we pulled out four tickets. Any hint of disappointment was blown out of the water as we all shouted, "We're going to Disney World!"

Anticipation. Expectation. Disappointment. Joy. These are common emotions around the holidays.

Today marks the first day of Advent—the four weeks that lead up to Christmas. We all have certain expectations about what the next four weeks will be like. For some of us, our expectations are low. The holidays are filled with sorrow at the loss of loved ones, separation from family, or pain as wounds from the past and hurts from the present are brought into sharp focus. For others, our expectations are high. We are anticipating a rejuvenating break from work or school and a time to relax and celebrate with those that we love the most.

This morning, we are going to spend some time examining and reevaluating our expectations for this Christmas season. What are we hoping for this Christmas? What are we longing for?

Today's message kicks off a three-week Advent series called "With." In this series, we will be exploring the theme of Immanuel, God with us. Immanuel is a title that is given to Jesus in the passage that we are going to look at this morning. This title only appears one other place in Scripture. But the idea of Immanuel—of God's desire to be *with* his people and his plan for achieving that desire—runs throughout Scripture.

Our passage this morning invites us to ask a simple question: Are you anticipating Immanuel? This Christmas season, what are you anticipating? What are you hoping for? Longing for?

As we delve into this passage, we are going to see that the best thing that we could hope for this Christmas is greater intimacy with Jesus—Immanuel, God with us.

## Matthew 1:18-25

**Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. 20 But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” 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). 24 When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, 25 but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.**

### An Ordinary Man

We don't know a lot about Joseph. The only scenes in which he appears as a character of any substance are here at the beginning of Matthew. He is mentioned in the birth narrative of Jesus in Luke's Gospel as well, but the focus here is very much on Mary.

What we do know about Joseph is that he was an ordinary man. He wasn't rich. He wasn't powerful. He wasn't anyone special. He was an ordinary man. He worked an ordinary job as a carpenter. He was just another person like you and me.

At the beginning of this passage, we learn some important information about Joseph. Let's look again at v. 18.

#### Matthew 1:18:

**Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.**

Mary and Joseph were betrothed to be married. Betrothal was more serious than our modern idea of engagement. It was made official by a legal contract and

required a divorce to end. During a period of betrothal, the man and woman were still living in separate homes and were certainly not sleeping together.

During this period of betrothal, Joseph finds out that Mary is pregnant. He knows that the baby is not his. He draws the only logical conclusion: Mary has been unfaithful. Imagine what Joseph must have felt at this moment. Anger. Betrayal. Shame. Disappointment. How would you respond in this situation if you were Joseph? Return anger with anger? Shame with shame? That's not how Joseph chooses to respond.

Verse 19 tells us that Joseph was a “just man and unwilling to put her to shame,” so he resolved to “divorce her quietly.”

I have heard Joseph described as this man of incredibly godly character. Even in the face of his anger, shame, and disappointment, he takes the high road and decides to end the betrothal without publicly shaming Mary for her unfaithfulness.

Let's not be too quick to call Joseph a saint here for his actions. True, he does show grace to Mary. According to the law, Mary should have been exposed as an adulteress and punished, possibly even stoned to death. Joseph doesn't lash out. He doesn't punish Mary. He doesn't shame Mary.

But neither does he decide to forgive completely. He doesn't choose to stick around to love and support Mary and help raise this child. Instead, he decides to end their betrothal quietly.

Remember, Joseph is an ordinary man. A godly man, yes. But an ordinary man who experiences anger, pain, and disappointment just like you and me.

In the midst of all of these emotions, the Lord pulls back the curtain to show Joseph the piece of the picture that he had been missing.

#### Matthew 1:20-21:

**But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”**

Here, Joseph is asleep, before he has divorced Mary but after he has decided to do so, and an angel comes to him in a dream with this shocking news. Not only has Mary not been unfaithful to him, but she is about to give birth to a child that has been conceived by the Holy Spirit and who will save people from their sins. And he, Joseph, is being asked by the Lord to marry the mother of this child and to raise this child as his own.

What?!? That's not what he was expecting.

There's a lot to unfold in these two verses, and we will come back to them, but let's take a look at the next two verses because that is where Matthew explains the significance of what is happening here.

## The Promise of Immanuel

**Matthew 1:22-23:**

**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"**

When I was in middle school, I had just started to read the Bible on my own. At the same time, we had been talking in church about how Jesus was the fulfillment of so many prophecies from the Old Testament. I thought that it would be really cool to read through the whole Old Testament and look for all of the prophecies that point forward to Jesus. When I told my parents about this plan, my mom said, "You know, you might want to start with the New Testament and find all of the places that it refers back to prophecies in the Old Testament instead of the other way around." There was a lot of wisdom in that advice.

In the first two chapters of Matthew, five times Matthew says that something "took place to fulfill what spoken by the prophet." But when we go back and read those verses, it is not at all apparent, at least on the surface, that the prophet was speaking about Jesus whatsoever. That is certainly the case with this quotation in v. 22-23.

The quotation here is from Isaiah 7:14. To understand why Matthew is quoting Isaiah, we need to understand a bit about what is happening in Isaiah 7. At the time Isaiah is writing, Ahaz is king of Israel, and Israel's enemies are rising up against them. Ahaz is fearful that these enemies are going to defeat them, but the Lord through the prophet Isaiah assures him that he will not be defeated.

To give Ahaz confidence, the Lord says that he is going to give him a sign. So he says this in Isaiah 7:14, "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." Isaiah goes on to say that Israel's enemies will be defeated while this child is still a young boy.

One element of biblical prophecy is that it often has multiple fulfillments. There is often an initial, literal fulfillment. But there is often a deeper meaning to the prophecy that is fulfilled later by Jesus. That seems to be the case here.

In the short term, this prophecy seems to be about a child who was to be born shortly after the prophecy was made. When this boy is still young, Israel's enemies—named specifically—will be defeated. So this child is to serve as a sign of God's protection.

Commentators debate about who this child is, but the most likely suggestion is that this child is Isaiah's son, Maher-shalal-hash-baz. In the very next chapter, Isaiah has a son, and it is said that Israel's enemies will be defeated before this child can even speak.

This child will be called Immanuel, God with us, not because this child was actually God, but because this child was to be a symbol of God's presence.

The word translated "virgin" in Isaiah is better translated as "young women." It is used to refer to any young woman of marriageable age, whether she is a virgin or not. This is not a declaration that this child will be miraculously born from a virgin.

Rather, it is an affirmation that this child will be a sign of God's presence with his people. This child is supposed to be a reminder of God's faithfulness. When people look at this child, they are supposed to remember that God has not forsaken his people. Even though it may not look like it, God is still very much *with* his people.

So the promise of this coming child, Immanuel, is a promise of God's *protection* of and his *presence with* his people.

If we move forward just two chapters in Isaiah, we read again of a child who is to come. This child, presumably, is the same Immanuel as in chapter 7. But now, we get the very strong sense that Isaiah is not talking only about his son, but of another child who would come sometime later. Look at Isaiah's prophecy in Isaiah 9:6-7.

"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. 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."

This child is a son who will reign on the throne of David. He will rule with justice and righteousness. He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace.

As the people of God read these words through the centuries, they were filled with hope. The world may be full of injustice, but One is coming who will bring justice. The world may be filled with chaos, but one is coming who will bring order. The world may be filled with violence, but One is coming who will bring peace. The world may be filled with pain and defeat and sorrow, but One is coming who will bring joy and victory. And this one will be called Immanuel, God with us.

The promise of Immanuel brings hope. The promise of Immanuel brought hope to Israel. You can be sure that the promise of Immanuel brought hope to Joseph. And the promise of Immanuel is meant to bring hope to us as well.

Steve Holmlund commented earlier in the service that the Advent candle for today is meant to represent hope. We all desperately need hope.

It would seem that the world thinks of Silicon Valley as a place of hope. Indeed, many people look to Silicon Valley as their place of hope. If we can't fix the world's problems through our technology and innovation, then the problems must not be fixable.

But my observation after living here for a few years is that Silicon Valley is not home to many hopeful people. I've talked to a lot of people here who seem to have lost hope altogether.

What about you? Have you lost hope?

Have you lost hope in your work? In a relationship? In our country, our leaders? In yourself? In God?

The only way to maintain hope is to look to Jesus. As the true and final Immanuel, he not only serves as

a sign of God's presence and protection. He is also the very one who sits on the throne forever to establish true and lasting justice, peace, and righteousness.

## The Power of Immanuel

Matthew wants us to know that Jesus, as Immanuel, brings hope. But there is more going on than that. This is not a generic hope. Rather, it is a specific hope—the hope of salvation. Let's look back at Matthew 1:20-21.

If you have ever found out something that surprised you about your significant other, it pales in comparison to what Joseph learns here. You're telling me that Mary has not been unfaithful? That the child growing inside her was conceived by the Holy Spirit? And this that child is going to save people from their sins? Whoa.

For centuries before Jesus was born, the people of Israel were expecting a savior, a messiah.

Passages like the Isaiah prophecies that we just looked at (and so many others) created a hope—an expectation—that God would send someone to save his people. This messiah was going to be one who came to sit on the throne of David and rule with justice and righteousness, as we just saw.

Through the years, Israel waited for this messiah. And nothing happened. By the time the Lord speaks to Joseph in this dream, it had been 400 years of silence from the Lord. Four hundred years of waiting!

During that time, Israel had become subject (yet again) to their enemies. This time, the enemy was Rome. Israel had no king. The throne of David sat empty. God's people were subject to Rome.

And so they hoped — they longed — for a savior who would come to free them from Rome. To lead them into battle against their enemies. To restore power to Israel.

Then comes this word from the Lord to Joseph. The messiah is almost here. The savior is coming. And he is going to save his people from... their sins? Wait. We wanted to be saved from Rome. We wanted a political leader. A military ruler.

The problem with Israel was not that they lacked hope. It was not that they didn't expect God to save them. Israel's problem was that they didn't realize from what they truly needed to be saved.

We make the same mistake in 1,000 different ways. God, if you could just fix my marriage, then life would be good. If you could just straighten up my kids, all would be well. If you could give me the job I really want, the promotion I deserve, the raise I really need... If you could take away my anxiety... If you could fix my health... If you could save my loved one... God, please, don't you care?

I sincerely hope that God fixes your marriage and protects your children and provides for your family and heals your loved ones. But those are not the things that you need to be saved from. You need to be saved from your sin.

At a fundamental level, you and I are broken. We are wired to choose not-God. We are disobedient. We are rebellious. We are selfish. We are prideful. We are sinners. We desperately need someone who can save us from our sins.

Jesus is that person. Salvation is made possible through the incarnation, the coming of the God who took on flesh. Immanuel, God with us. The power of Immanuel is salvation. And salvation is only made possible through incarnation.

On the night that Jesus was betrayed, knowing that he was going to be crucified in less than 24 hours, he pleaded with the Father, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." (Matthew 26:39).

I wonder if Jesus had a similar conversation with the Father before the incarnation? Looking down from heaven. Watching the whole story unfold. I'm going to be born as a baby? They're going to change my diapers? I am going to depend on them to keep me alive? I am going to experience pain? I am going to face temptation? And then at the end of it all, they are going to kill me? Father, is there any other way?

But there was no other way. This was the only way to save us. This was the only way to deal with our sin. This was the only way to fix a broken world. This was the only way to be *with* us. And that is what Jesus wanted more than anything.

So, with great joy, Jesus took on flesh. He became human. He walked among us. He served us. And eventually he died for us.

The Christmas story today is too easily tamed down to Charlie Brown and cute nativity sets. It becomes

mundane. But the incarnation is anything but mundane. It is miraculous. It is marvelous. We ought to marvel at the incarnation.

In a high-tech world with endless amounts of pictures, videos, and information in the palm of our hands any time we want it, we don't truly marvel at many things these days.

The incarnation ought to make us marvel. It ought to amaze us. It ought to stir our hearts to worship, because nothing is more amazing than Immanuel.

## The Gift of Immanuel

When Joseph first heard this surprising, amazing, wonderful news from the Lord, it is hard to imagine what he must have felt. Matthew doesn't tell us that exactly. But he does tell us what he did next.

### Matthew 1:24-25:

**When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, 25 but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.**

Joseph accepted the responsibility of raising the incarnate Son of God. I wonder what that was like for him? To hold Immanuel in his arms. To watch him learn to walk. To teach him the family business. To be *with* him for so much time.

Two years ago, my wife and I had our first child, a son. Without a doubt, one of the greatest privileges of my life so far has been building a relationship with my son. Playing at the park. Going on walks. Building Legos in the living room. Reading books before bed. It doesn't really matter what we do. I just enjoy being with him.

This is the kind of relationship that Joseph got to have with Jesus. But this is also the kind of relationship that we get to have with Jesus. We may not be able to hold Jesus in our arms or learn to watch him walk or teach him to build furniture. But we too have the opportunity to build a relationship with him, and this is the greatest gift that we could ever hope for.

The gift of Immanuel is relationship. Jesus didn't just come to save us from our sins. He came to save us from our sins so that he could be *with* us. So that he could build a relationship with us.

When God created Adam and Eve and placed them in the garden, their relationship was perfect. They walked together. They talked together. They spent time with each other.

But when Adam and Eve chose their will over God's will, the relationship was broken. Ever since then, God has been working to restore the relationship.

Jesus took on flesh because he wanted to be with us. He didn't come so that we could avoid eternal misery. He came so that we could know him. Intimately.

Anticipate intimacy with Jesus this Christmas.

The irony: there are a lot of factors working against us during the holidays. Schedules are packed. Family tensions are high. The pull of materialism is at its highest.

Too often, I have gotten to the other side of Christmas only to feel like the Christmas season left me further from Jesus rather than closer. Don't let that happen to you this year. Jesus is here today, and he wants intimacy in relationship with you. Will you give him the space?

## **Conclusion**

It was nearly 20 years ago that my family and I went to Disney World together. When I first saw those tickets, I was filled with anticipation and expectation. I was longing for fun rides, Mickey Mouse pancakes, and pictures with Goofy. I was so excited for all of the fun things we were going to get to do. I was filled with anticipation.

Looking back, I hardly remember what we did while we were there. What I do remember is doing those things with the people that I love.

We were created for relationship. Relationship with each other, yes. But first and foremost for relationship with God.

What are you excited about this Christmas season? What are you longing for? Is it Jesus? Because he is longing for you.