

Grace, Mercy, and Peace be unto you from God our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

[Introduction]

- [1] In the dark recesses of Israel's history,
at a most unlikely moment,
[2] in a rebuke against the angry King Ahaz,
one of the most beautiful words ever to grace the human tongue
found its way into the language of the world.

It went hardly noticed for seven centuries,
until God spoke it again.

This time it was spoken, not in prophecy,
but in fulfilment.

Because finally it was here: the day of Immanuel.

- [3] *Immanuel*—what a word that is!

[Means God with Us!]

Immanuel—God with us.

“Pleased as Man with man to dwell, Jesus, our Immanuel!” (LSB 380:2).

God with us.

- [4] It could be a prayer,
reaching to the very limits of our needs and our desires—God be with us.

- [5] It could be a benediction, a blessing, or a wish.
In fact, every time we bid somebody good-bye,
we are sharing that blessing, Immanuel,
for “good-bye” is simply an abbreviation of “God be with you.”

Immanuel.

- [6] Let us contemplate it
—as Mary did when first she heard of it—let us ponder it in your heart.

Immanuel is a philosophy and a theology in itself.

It sets us apart from any human philosophy and largely from any religion.

In saying that God is with us, it draws a line between deism and theism.

Some people believe in a god as Creator.

They believe that the world was made by some higher power,
and that this god set the world in motion,
like a fully wound-up clockwork machine,
with its laws of nature like cogs interacting together.

And then, their god retired to let it run its course,
while we as men and women make the best of it.
It is a common held belief in a god “out there.”

[7] But to celebrate Christmas is to reject that idea totally.
Jesus is Immanuel—God with us. Not out there. God down here.

[*The Inescapable God*]

[8] To some...
Immanuel might be a frightening word, an awesome and a terrible thing.
Because it means God with us, whether we want it or not.

[9] In the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord asked: “*Am I a God at hand, declares the LORD, and not a God far away? Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the LORD*” (Jer 23:23–24).

Immanuel means there is no God-forsaken corner
where we can escape the presence of our Lord.
And even if we should take refuge in our private thoughts,
which are exposed to no man,
even there, Jeremiah reminds us, God is with us:
“*I the LORD search the heart and test the mind*” (Jer 17:10).

Yes, Immanuel would be the most terrible word,
if it means the Almighty, in all his terror, is here to judge our sins.
Indeed, it would be such a word of terror
if the events of Christmas did not transform the situation.

[*God’s inescapable love*]

[10] For here, in the birth foretold to the ancient prophet and,
announced to Joseph the carpenter,
we see an end to the thought that God is a stranger and an enemy to be feared.

[11] *“The Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel”* (v 14).

Here we see, “God with us” means God as us.

Born a man to live as a man;
talking with men, touching them, weeping for them;
living as a man and dying as only a man can die.

In this life, God with us means God on our side.

Messiah with us! Immanuel!
Son of God with us! Immanuel!

For you see, God is Christ,

*“reconciling the world to himself,
not counting their trespasses against them”* (2 Cor 5:19).

[12] God with us,
God as us, and
God for us.

[Immanuel Is for You]

And Immanuel means at least one more thing.

[13] God with us means God in control.

That’s not to say God has taken away all the freedoms and choices
with which he created us.

But it means that through it all,

God has a plan and a purpose to bring us back to him.

And the New Testament makes it clear.

All this took place, says Matthew,
to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet.

*“Do not fear to take Mary as your wife,
for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit”* (Mt 1:20).

From beginning to end, this central event, “God with us,” was the doing of God.

Not by chance,
Not by human design,
Not by anything or anybody *BUT* God.

It was a deed untouched by human hand.

Indeed, it frustrated and overturned many a human plan.

We might reflect that the Holy Family was very nearly a divorced family.

“Joseph, being a just man, resolved to divorce her quietly” (Mt 1:19).

Until, that is, he was brought to see the truth of one simple fact: God with us.

[*Conclusion*]

[14] It may be, as you approach this Christmas,
that not everything is as you would want it.

Relationships can be strained.

Separations are especially painful.

Uncertainties and anxieties spoil the season of peace on earth

—health, work, children, parents, even faulty cars and leaking roofs.

And perhaps, despite all the efforts of the Advent voice

to prepare the way of the Lord in our lives, and to ready us for our God with us,
the way can seem anything but straight,

as it meanders past greed and selfishness,

lust and bitterness within us.

The truth is, it's probably too late to do anything about those things now,
at least this side of Christmas.

Don't panic, and don't despair. God is with us, Immanuel. Amen!

So we... Declare his glory among the nations,

his marvelous deeds among the people. AMEN! (Psalm 96:3)
