

“Immanuel,” Matthew 1:18-25 (First Sunday of Advent, December 3, 2017)

<sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

<sup>23</sup> “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). <sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, <sup>25</sup> but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

## PRAY

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent is the time of year in the church calendar where we remember the first advent, or “coming,” of Jesus Christ, when he came as a baby that first Christmas morning. Advent is also the season when we look forward to the second Advent – the return of Jesus Christ in glory and power at the end of the age.

This morning we are beginning a series of sermons leading up to Christmas Day in which we will look at the first two chapters of the gospel of Matthew, the first book of the New Testament. Matthew is only one of two books in the Bible – Luke being the other one – that includes any material about the birth of Jesus. You won’t find that information anywhere else in Scripture.

In verse 23 Matthew quotes from the book of Isaiah and writes: “ ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel’ (which means, God with us).” This morning I want to focus on that phrase and show us three things before we take the Lord’s Supper: first, God with us shows us what God wants. Second, it shows us how God guides. Third, what God does.

First, God with us shows us what God wants. Some of you here this morning may not believe in God. One of the wonderful things about our society and the way we do church is on any given morning people with a variety of different views might be here, so if you are here and you don’t believe we welcome you, are glad you are here, and we do structure this service with you in mind.

And it may be that when you hear of the God of the Christian Bible you think of him primarily as a judgmental, condemning God, who is just out to get everyone.

Now, think with me for a minute please: the Christian message is that God became a baby in Jesus Christ. Take a moment and think about the last time you were around a newborn baby. Has anyone ever looked at newborn in a crib, picked the baby up, and said, “I feel so judged by

this baby. Look at this smug stare this baby his giving me – he thinks he’s better than me!” No. Babies are incapable of that. Friends, if all the Christian God does is judge and condemn people, then the birth of Jesus Christ at Christmas makes no sense. There’s got to be more to Christianity if the birth of Christ is so central to the faith.

Or maybe that’s not you. It may be that when you think of God you think of him as a benevolent, grandfather in the sky, who just wishes you well in whatever you do. To the extent our public culture has a view of God, that’s it – God just approves of you. Just do the best you can, be true to yourself, and God, whatever or whoever else he is, approves of you.

But I’ve never met anyone who thought of God like that who also felt close to him or intimate with him. He approves of you, but the way he can approve is because he really doesn’t care.

Yet the message of Christianity is that in Jesus Christ God became a human being – he remained fully God but also became fully human – and arrived on earth as a helpless baby. And babies, especially the newborns, are not just always ready to be picked up and held – *they must be picked up and held. They must be cared for.* They must be nursed, and changed, and cradled, and loved. A baby can’t live without being held and cuddled and kissed and hugged. Babies who don’t have that are called “failure to thrive” babies. Whatever else you can say about a baby, you can’t say that a baby doesn’t let you get close to her. You must get close to that baby, or the baby will die.

So “God with us” shows us that the Christian God is not distant nor that the Christian God just wants to judge and condemn. ***Instead, “God with us” means God must want a relationship with us.*** If God were primarily judgmental and condemning, no need to come as a baby. He can condemn just fine from heaven. If God just wished us well, just wanted to be a grandfather in the sky, but didn’t really want to be close to us, no need to come as a baby. He can wish us well just fine from heaven.

“God with us” means God wants us. Why else would he come as a baby and expose himself so completely if he didn’t want the chance at a relationship with us?

My plea this morning is this: if you have rejected Christianity or you are on the verge of rejecting Christianity, then please make sure you’re actually rejecting the Christian faith and not some caricature of it. Maybe you’ve gotten really irritated with someone you know or someone on television who claims to be a Christian but they seem really unloving and all they seem to do is judge and hate condemn everyone. Understandably, you want no part of that so you’ve said, “I’m not going to be a Christian.” But the birth of Jesus proves those kinds of attitudes can’t be the essence of Christianity at all. You think you’re rejecting Christianity, but you’re not – you’re throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

So, if you are determined to take an anti-Christian stance in your life, make sure you are rejecting the God of the Bible who wants a relationship with you so badly that he would humble himself to become a baby that had to be nursed and wrapped in a blanket. You can only be sure you’re rejecting real Christianity when you are determined to reject Jesus as a baby.

Second, “God with us” shows us how God guides. Let’s read verses 18-19: “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. <sup>19</sup> And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.”

Put yourself in Joseph’s shoes for a minute. You’re engaged to be married to a girl. In first century Israel, engagement was a much bigger deal than it is today. You’ll notice the ESV called it a betrothal. It involved signing a contract. The contract was so binding that you could only get out of it by going through divorce proceedings. There was absolutely no sexual contact, not even kissing, until the night of the wedding, which was one year from the date of engagement.

You’re Joseph, and at some point during this one year period your fiancé Mary comes to you and says, “I’m pregnant, but I haven’t been with another man. Instead, an angel named Gabriel told me that God made me pregnant by sending his Holy Spirit to me.”

It’s not explicitly stated in Matthew 1 but I think it’s implied in the text that Joseph does not believe Mary. How could he? Joseph was not an atheist, he believed in God, so he believed God could do this and an angel could have told Mary that. But what’s more likely? That it actually happened the way Mary said it or that she got pregnant the more customary way?

You’re Joseph in that scenario. What do you do? I think men for two thousand years have admired what Joseph did. He refused to take revenge on Mary. According to the book of Deuteronomy, the penalty for what he thought she’d done was death. He refused to pursue that penalty for Mary.

Yet he also refused to go through with the marriage, for he had too much integrity to just act like nothing had happened. Joseph put the most charitable construction on Mary’s behavior that he could. He must have assumed she was so ashamed of what she’d done or perhaps so traumatized by what had been done to her that she was unable to tell the truth. So he made the decision to “divorce her quietly.” No demand for public shaming – Joseph figured the ordeal itself was punishment enough for her.

However, God did not want his son, Jesus Christ, growing up without an earthly father. But he did not expect Joseph to just take Mary’s word for it. So, verse 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.’”

It was too much to expect Joseph to make this kind of decision based only on Mary’s testimony, so God sent another witness – an angel. Maybe the same Gabriel who had appeared to Mary. And this is what I want you to see: *God always, always gives his people what they need to make the decisions he wants them to make.*

Since our church is in a college town and is relatively young, I’ve had a lot of conversations with people at Grace who say they want God to guide them in making a certain decision: about a major, or a job, or a move, or a marriage. And most of the time my advice is pretty simple: if the

decision you're facing is not sinful, and if you want to do it, and you have the opportunity to do it, and you can see how it would serve the Lord, then do it. Make the decision. You can't decide to commit adultery. That's sinful. You can't decide to rob a bank. That's sinful. But pretty much anything that's not sinful, if you want to do it and you can do it and you can see how it could honor God and good people around you are encouraging you to do it, then do it.

Just don't go looking for signs, because you'll drive yourself crazy looking for signs and you'll probably read them wrongly anyway. I once spoke with a young woman who asked me whether she should try to get back with her ex-boyfriend. The problem was he treated her like dirt when they were together, he told her he didn't want to get back with her, and in fact she had just found out the week before that one night he had too much to drink and had a fling with another girl. But she had heard a love song on the radio a few days prior and she really believed that it was a sign from God telling her to try and get back with him.

So I had to tell her – that wasn't a sign, it was just a song. If you start looking for signs you'll turn anything and everything into signs. It's not that God doesn't use circumstances to show us his will. He does – it's just that it's so easy to read what we want into circumstances. The decision that young lady needed to make was to realize that her ex-boyfriend was no longer interested in her, that as much as it might hurt it was a good thing, and move on. She didn't need a sign from God to confirm that – it was clear. That's the way it is with most of our decisions – once we look at all the facts in light of the Scripture and get competent counsel from people who love us it will be clear what we need to do.

But occasionally if you're one of God's people you will need to make a decision, and the decision will be so big and have such implications for yourself and those around you that it will require a significant step of faith. And when that happens, while God probably won't send you an angel or a dream, he will give you what you need to make the decision he wants you to make.

As best I can tell I've only had one decision like that in my life. It was the decision to go into the ministry. My wife and I had already gone to college, gone to graduate school, had started one career path, had bought a house and had a child on the way, and then I start feeling like God wants me to quit my job, sell our house, and go to seminary. There were all kinds of questions about the future I couldn't answer, I really didn't even know what a pastor did at the time except that they preach on Sunday mornings and try and help people during the week (which isn't a bad summary of what I do, by the way), but I was feeling a strong, internal call to go into the ministry.

But I hadn't told my wife this. And while I didn't know much about going into the ministry I knew it would be a disaster if I wanted to go and she didn't. In fact, my biggest fear in the whole process was not failing to become a pastor, but becoming a pastor and my wife understandably becoming bitter in the process because she didn't want to do it. I really needed for us to both be called to the ministry. And when I approached her and told her, "Honey, I think I want to quit my job and sell our house and move us and our three month old baby to another state and away from family so I can go to seminary, even though the whole time we've known each other I've never even hinted I might want to do this" her response was: "Really? My best friend and I have

been praying that you would do just that.” She hadn’t told me. God had just moved their hearts to pray.

“The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.” Proverbs 16:33. “God with us” shows us that God always, always gives us what we need in order to make the decision he wants us to make.

Third, “God with us” shows us what God does. Verse 21: “She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

Everyone on the planet is a sinner. That means that there is a God who created the universe, who created us, who established the parameters for how we should live, yet we’ve all violated his rules. We have done things we should not have done, and we have not done all the things we should have done. All of us have broken the Ten Commandments: we’ve all failed to honor our father and our mother (that’s commandment five), we’ve all coveted something our neighbor has (that’s commandment ten). And even those commandments that it looks like, on the surface, we haven’t broken, when Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount explains what’s really behind the commandments it becomes clear that we have. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’ [that’s the seventh commandment]. But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Matthew 5:27-28. We’ve all lusted, we’ve all held onto bitterness, we’ve all refused to forgive, we’ve all lied, we’ve all hated other people – ***we are all wretched sinners.***

And our sin, the Bible says, has created a debt between us and God. Later on in the Sermon on the Mount, chapter six of Matthew, we read the Lord’s Prayer. And one of the lines in the Lord’s Prayer goes like this: “Father in heaven, forgive us our debts.” Jesus is not talking about money God loaned us and we haven’t paid back. We owed God a perfect life, and instead we’ve lived an imperfect life, and the difference creates a debt we owe God, *and that debt will come due on a certain future day called the final judgment.* On that day, God will demand an accounting from all of us, and because of our debts we can never pay up.

Some of you don’t believe that this morning; I know that. You think that’s just what preachers say, because preachers are supposed to say stuff like that. But think about it like this: nothing explains why human beings are so anxious all the time like sin and the debt it creates with God.

When you are in financial debt, you worry a lot – how am I going to pay the bills? How will I keep from being foreclosed on? How can I keep the lights on? But some of you now make more money than you ever thought you would. Does that make you any less anxious? No – the more money you have, the more worry you have. No amount of money keeps the anxiety away. No amount of parenting keeps the worry about your children away. No amount of effort keeps the worry about your job or your grades away.

No matter where we turn, no matter how good things are going or how bad, all of us are anxious because we know we should be perfect and we know that we are not. Our sin debt creates what the philosophers call an “existential dread” in all of us.

But “God with us” means that God saves us from our sins because in Jesus Christ he pays the debt we owe. It means we don’t have to be anxious anymore. How can we know that for sure?

This is where the doctrine of the virgin birth of Jesus becomes so important (or, to be more precise, the virginal conception of Jesus). Matthew 1 tells us that Mary became pregnant not through the action of any man, but solely by the work of the Holy Spirit. We don’t know how it happened but maybe the best way to think about it is that God implanted Jesus as an embryo from heaven in Mary’s womb.

But because we believe it happened, it means when you become a Christian – in other words, when you see that you are a sinner, and you see that you owe God this debt, and you call on Jesus to save you from your sins by paying the debt himself – you can be sure you’re getting *a real Savior who can really pay*, and not a counterfeit one.

You know when you go to the store and you pay with cash, the cashiers always take your twenty-dollar, or fifty-dollar, or hundred-dollar bills and hold them up to the light and mark them (I’ve even seen them do this with a five-dollar bill). Why? They don’t want to get stuck with counterfeit currency. In fact, there’s a whole federal agency – the Bureau of Engraving and Printing – devoted to producing paper money that cannot be easily counterfeited, so that no one gets stuck with a debt someone else owes.

Cashiers don’t want to get stuck with counterfeit bills at the end of the day when they close out their registers, and friends on the day of judgment you *don’t want to get stuck with a counterfeit Savior*. The virgin birth tells you that you won’t be, because *Jesus Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit*. He lived a life that had no sin, all the way from conception, and he perfectly devoted himself to God. So when he died on the cross he wasn’t paying his debt – he didn’t have any. He was paying for yours.

Friends, what I want for all of you is for you to *stop trying to pay the debt yourself*. Some of you are trying to pay the debt by being the best parent you can be, or the best lover you can be, or be the best money-maker you can be, *and it is wearing you out*. *This drive to be perfect is crushing you*. And for others of you you’ve given up trying to pay your debt, but you don’t think Jesus has paid it. So, instead, you cope, you self-medicate, you check out in unhealthy ways, *and it’s wrecking your life*.

***But God with us means you don’t have to worry anymore.*** You don’t have to be perfect, you don’t have to make all the right moves. You don’t have to take that burden on yourself. You’ll make mistakes, but Jesus has paid all your debts.

Friends, we’re about to take the Lord’s Supper. All Christians, whether members of this church or not, whether baptized in a particular way or not – are welcome to come to the Lord’s Table. We read this about the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:26: “For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”

One day, Jesus will return for his church and lead us into the new heaven and the new earth. But you know one thing we won't do there? We won't take the Lord's Supper! Right now we take it by faith, longing to one day see our Lord, praying for his return.

But once he does return and we see him face to face, and we will never use the bread and the cup again. So every time we take the Lord's Supper, we don't just remember what Jesus has done, paying our debts, but we remember what he will do – he will take us to be with him. Each time we take the Lord's Supper we should pray that it will be the last time we take the Lord's Supper, for we should long for the coming of the day, his final Advent, when he will come and establish his kingdom, right every wrong, reign in every heart, and make everything sad come untrue.

AMEN