

“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel’ (which means, God with us).” I think all of us would agree that is an astounding claim. Completely unprecedented.

But here's the thing... I'm not talking about the virgin birth. Oh, that's astounding too, don't get me wrong. But this morning I want to consider the other claim made in this prophecy: “And they shall call his name Immanuel (which means, God with us).”

Because, let's be honest, it seems far more common that we experience God's absence than God's presence. Most of us, at some point or another, have wondered whether God is really with us. We face suffering in our lives, and we wonder if God cares. We encounter things we can't explain or understand, and we wonder if God really does exist. We cry out to God on our knees and then wonder if we're shouting at the air.

We slog through life, never experiencing much of a spiritual high or low, and we begin to question if God is with us. With a few exceptions, you and I probably experience a good number of moments in our lives that make us wonder if God is absent.

You're not alone when you wonder. You're not the first to question God's presence and probably won't be the last. It's safe to say that very few people have never questioned God's presence. In fact, those who question God's presence are actually only continuing a millennia-old theme of God's people doubting his presence.

It may feel like it's always been that way, in fact. But, in reality, there was a time when we didn't question God's presence. In the Garden of Eden, before the fall into sin, we didn't question it. We couldn't possibly question it. God literally walked and talked with his human creatures.

His presence was obvious. Adam and Eve did not doubt that he was there. Thanks to the devil's lies, they doubted his trustworthiness and goodness. But that's a different problem. His presence was obvious.

After the fall, however, God's people have often doubted his presence among them. The episode with the golden calf is a case in point. In Exodus 19, God told Moses to meet him on top of Mount Sinai so that he could give him his Law. Moses was gone for a while. The people got antsy. They began to question God's presence.

By the time we get to Exodus 32, they've concluded that God does not exist. Or at least, that he is no longer with them. Never mind the ten plagues that God brought on Egypt to deliver them. Never mind the parting of the Red Sea and God's miraculous rescue from pharaoh's army. Never mind the manna that God provided in the wilderness so that his people wouldn't go hungry. The people cried out to God and when God didn't immediately respond, they decided that he just wasn't there.

A similar happens in our reading today from Isaiah 7. King Ahaz doubted that God was with him. Now, to be honest, King Ahaz was not a faithful man of God. Far from it. Ahaz worshipped just about every false god or goddess except the God of Israel. So this doubt it really par for the course with him.

But, this time, he had a reason to doubt: foreign armies were mounting around him. Israel was surrounded by powerful nations on the brink of invasion. God had promised to be with his people forever. God had promised to protect and preserve them. But Ahaz and the Israelites looked around at the situation and were not at all convinced.

That's when Isaiah entered the scene. God sent Isaiah to give a message to Ahaz. His message was simple: God is with you. He promised he would be with you. You can believe him. It's true.

If you have doubts, simply ask him for a sign—anything you want—and he will show you that he is with you. Can you imagine that? An invitation from God to ask him for a sign? Normally, demanding a sign from God is a terrible thing. Something that he rarely will grant someone. But here he encourages Ahaz to ask for a sign. Anything he wants. Anything that will prove to him God's presence.

But Ahaz wouldn't do it. Why not? Because he had already lost his faith. He had already put his faith in a "golden calf". Although, this time it wasn't an idol to a false god. It was an alliance with a foreign army. Ahaz believed he could secure the nation through purely political, human means. He didn't need God anymore.

That's when Isaiah spoke those words that Matthew would quote seven hundred years later. You don't trust God enough to ask for a sign? *"The Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."*

It's certainly a peculiar statement. And it needs to be interpreted in two different ways. Because it's not just one prophecy. It's two prophecies, stacked on top of each other.

For Ahaz, it was a prophecy of God's timing. God will do something amazing. Something that you think is impossible. As impossible as a virgin giving birth. And he will do it in the time it would take that virgin to give birth. Before she even had time to wean the child off curds and honey. Before she even had time to teach the child right and wrong. In that short length of time, God will take away all your enemies and give you the safety you desire. Then you will know that God is with you.

And God did it. Just a year later, the Assyrians swept through the two kingdoms threatening Judah and laid waste to them. Jerusalem was saved. Though they had an unfaithful king who would continue in his idolatry, God was faithful to them. God was with them.

But this prophecy wasn't fully fulfilled with King Ahaz. No, God had something else in mind. A far more literal fulfillment of Isaiah's words. A far more literal child to be born of a virgin. One who would be called Immanuel—"God with us." God would be with his people to save them from their sins.

Immanuel appeared as Jesus. The child who was also the eternal Son of God. He is God's sign. He is God's proof. He is God's guarantee that God is with us. And that is what makes Christmas important at all. That's why we've been getting ready to celebrate Christmas since the day after Thanksgiving. On December 25, we celebrate the fact that God is with us – that he is with us to save us.

Not just from the enemies of this world. But the enemies of our souls. He is with us to save us from sin, death, and the devil. He is with us to save us from this sinful world. He is with us to save us from our own sinful flesh. God is with us to save his people from their sins.

And yet, sometimes that old Adam leads us to doubt. We don't walk with God in the Garden anymore. We have our own golden calf episodes. God doesn't behave in ways that we think he should, and our faith wavers. We don't see God solving our problems or healing our diseases or fixing our families or answering our questions, and so we begin to wonder: Is God with us?

That's why God gives us other signs. The Early Church father, Augustine, once called the sacraments "the visible Word." They are the Word of God, and yet we can see them and touch them. As fully as Mary and Joseph could see and touch the Christ child himself.

Baptism and the Lord's Supper aren't just rituals we do out of tradition or symbols of our faith. They are Immanuel: God with us. And so they impact our lives in ways that we can't fully comprehend. They are God's Word made visible. They are God's grace made visible.

God promised King Ahaz a sign of his presence and then gave it to him. He visibly defeated all of Ahaz's enemies. God promises you a sign of his presence and then gives it to you. He visibly defeats all of your enemies in the waters of Holy Baptism. He visibly defeats all of your enemies in the Body and Blood of his son.

But Baptism isn't only a sign of God's gracious will to us. It's also a sign to the world. Washed in the waters of Holy Baptism, we have died with Christ and been raised with him so that we walk in newness of life. A newness of life that includes love for our church. Love for our neighbor. Love even for our enemies. And they will know we are Christ's disciples by our love. They will know that he is present with us by our love for them.

The same is true of the Lord's Supper. St Paul tells us that whenever we eat this bread and drink this cup we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. By gathering here this morning, you have proclaimed to the world that Christ is here. Immanuel is with us in this church. And he comes to us in, with, and under this very bread and wine for the forgiveness of our sins. And you believe his promise that he is coming again to judge the living and the dead and make all things new.

Today, it is exactly one week until Christmas. And if you're anything like my wife and I, you have a lot left to do. This errand. That errand. Cooking. Cleaning. Christmas programs. Family gatherings. All to, hopefully, get to that moment when you finally stop and remember Christ's birth.

But don't forget that even as we celebrate Christ's birth, he's already present with you. You are baptized into Christ. In just a few minutes, you will have His Body and Blood on your lips and in your heart.

So as you run around like a chicken with you head cut off, do this for me: remember your Baptism. Remember your baptism in the way you treat clerks and other shoppers, in the way you treat visiting loved ones who may be hard to love, in the way you think about the gifts you select for others. Remember your Baptism as a sign that the baby in the manger is not only the Savior of the world. He is your Savior from all your enemies. Walk in newness of life and proclaim his death until he comes again. Amen.