December 21, 2025
Fourth Sunday in Advent
St. Matthew's Lutheran Church
Isaiah 7:10-14
God Is With Us

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The sick child cuddles under the covers with his parents. The girl who just had her heart broken by her boyfriend quickly calls her mom. The husband and wife give each other a huge hug after they both escape harm from a serious car accident. Where do you turn when you need help? Who gives you that comfort to know everything's going to be ok just by their presence? God has given us wonderful people in our lives to calm and soothe us in our anxious moments. But, he's given more than that.

At the end of the day, we don't need to turn too far. God has given us himself, his very presence. God is with us. That's what Immanuel means. And, we get to explore what that meant when Jesus walked this earth and what it still means to this day.

King Ahaz from our lesson was in need of comfort and reassurance. God himself was right there offering his aid and comfort and power. Here's the situation. It was the 8th century before Christ. Ahaz, from David's family line, ruled as king in Jerusalem over the people of Judah. But his land had been invaded! The king of the northern tribes of Israel and the king of Aram had made an alliance against Ahaz and the nation of Judah. They were now marching on Jerusalem. Ahaz could see the writing on the wall. Jerusalem's defeat was inevitable.

But through the Prophet Isaiah the Lord had just promised deliverance. In fact the Lord promised that these enemies of his people would be shattered. He invites Ahaz to find comfort in this promise. It would all be possible because God was promising to be with him and display his strength.

Let's just pause there and marvel at the Lord's patience in making this promise. Ahaz had in no way been a God-fearing king. He had set up idols to Baal. He offered sacrifices at the high places and hilltops instead of at the Lord's temple. He sacrificed his sons in the fire. In fact, all this is why the Lord sent these enemies against Jerusalem to bring Ahaz to repentance.

But now what patience as the Lord again speaks his promises to Ahaz! He promises to deliver him and the people from their enemies. The Lord's desire to win over Ahaz as his own didn't even stop there. He wants to give Ahaz a firm rock for his faith to stand on. He tells Ahaz to ask for a sign, no matter how great whether in the deepest depths or the highest heights. And notice how Isaiah speaks to Ahaz. He doesn't just say "the God" but "your God." The Lord earnestly desired Ahaz to be his very own so he might go with him.

But how does Ahaz respond? Far worse than simply ignoring the Lord, he responds with mock piety, pretending to be a pious believer. **"I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test."**

If the Lord had not promised to give a sign, then expecting a sign would have been superstitiously putting God to the test. But the Lord in his patience had promised a sign to show how serious God was in wanting to go and be with him. And to such a generous promise Ahaz turns up his nose. "I don't need a sign. I'll do things my way." Ahaz knew that if he asked for a sign, the Lord would grant it, and Ahaz's stubbornness to defeat his enemies his own way would come to light. His own plan, by the way, was to side with the Assyrians, paying them off by using the temple treasury. His ungodly ways would continue without the Lord's presence with him.

He was trying to find comfort and assurance in something more seemingly immediate, something more seemingly visible. So, how does God respond? He gives a sign anyway! But, this sign would be one of judgment for Ahaz while being one of deliverance for you and me and all who trust in God. Notice Isaiah's language changes. No longer does he say "your God." Now, he says **"Will you try the patience of *my* God also?"** Isaiah found comfort in God's presence. Ahaz did not.

It's this setting where one of the most familiar prophetic messages of Christmas takes place. Yes, in the midst of deep spiritual darkness, in the face of defiance, God promises through Isaiah, **"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."** God's presence in the future would be in a place where no one would expect. In the womb of a virgin and later on placed as a humble babe in the manger. How's that for a powerful, clear promise of God's presence with mankind?

Of course, it was a miracle that the virgin would conceive. But, there's perhaps a greater miracle at play here. God was visibly present with human beings for 33 years. This time, not as a pillar of fire or as a pillar of cloud; not with magnificent glory overshadowing the temple. He was present as a human being himself. Immanuel….God *with* us.

Yes, what a miracle it is that God came down to mankind. The Son of God walked this earth. God's presence was literally, visibly with humans. How comforting! No wonder the sick, the lame, the blind, and the downtrodden flocked to him. He comforted them with words and actions. Even when he was on the cross and needing to be the one who was comforted, he was the one comforting by giving the command to John to care for his mother, Mary. Where did many turn for comfort when God was with them in the visible presence of Jesus, the Son of God? They turned to him. And, he never disappointed. He promised, **"Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."**

And, yet, like King Ahaz, there were many who pushed his presence away because he called out their stubbornness and sinful ways. He did so to bring them closer to him in repentance and faith, but they pushed back all the more. They went so far as to try and remove his presence forever more in death. And, they thought they succeeded as they gazed upon the cross in unbelief. But, 3 days later, Jesus proved God's everlasting presence with us by rising from the dead. And, even though he is no longer visibly with us, remember what he promised before he ascended. **"Surely I am with you always to the very end of the age."**

And, how true he has remained to that promise. He is constantly approaching us as lovingly, patiently, and specifically as he approached Ahaz. Which is a testament to his love because we have something in common with Ahaz. While you haven't sacrificed your sons in the fire, or built altars to the golden statue Baal or used temple treasury money to pay for an ally, you and I, like Ahaz, have a sinful nature. And, that sinful nature goes toe to toe with our new man every day. That sinful nature is hostile to God. And, it works hard in our life to push God's presence aside as if we don't need him nor want his presence.

We focus on ourselves, what we can do, our ingenuity, and our financial resources. God's promise of comfort to be with us becomes secondary. Our ways are plan #1. He becomes our fallback option. We turn to those earthly things for instant comfort and assurance that everything will be ok. Do I need to remind you and myself that such things are not always present with us like our God is?

Again, peer into the manger. Who is lying there? Is it not God? It is Immanuel, God with us. See how much he loved you and yearned to be with you by coming down from heaven! It's humbling to admit that we needed that Baby and his presence because we can't help ourselves. God came to be with us in that way so he could continue to be with us to this very day and so that someday we can be with him forever in heaven.

He is your God that came to be with you, to rescue and to save you. Our sins, like enemies surrounding a besieged city, had cut us off from God. But our God became one of us and broke through that siege. As your Substitute, the God-man Immanuel, Jesus Christ, carried away your sins on the cross. Rising from the dead, he has won the victory, and he gives you that victory. Faith trusts that his victory is ours, so that you who believe will live with him forever. Yes, he is forever God with us, forever Immanuel.

Truly, you don't have to look far to see his ongoing presence in your life. Our old Adam may look to the spiritual feelings within us or to statistical growth in church membership to see if God is with us. The old Adam may seek confirmation by what makes us feel good or look successful. But God does not offer his sure presence and comfort in those things.

Rather, he promises to be with us in his Word which is found in the Scriptures and in the Sacraments. There you find Immanuel, God with us. Like the unexpected, lowly womb of a virgin, like the unexpected, lowly manger where she laid him, so also the unexpected, seemingly lowly words of Scripture, and water of baptism, and bread and wine of the Lord's Supper, these are where Jesus reveals his presence today that he might comfort us in such powerful ways.

Human reason sees only what is weak and foolish in these places. But these are God's power and wisdom, for they bring you Immanuel. He is present not only with his almighty power that rules all things everywhere, but through the Scriptures and the Sacraments he is present with his grace and mercy to deliver and save us. And in the Lord's Supper he's present in that most miraculous way, so that we truly eat and drink his real body and blood for our forgiveness, for our strength to live for him, and for our guarantee of life eternal. Immanuel. God with us.

With us when he delivers us from physical evil by sending his angels to guard us in all our ways. With us when he keeps temptation away or provides his Word to guard us against temptation when it does come. With us when we are in the depths of tragedy by reminding us the glories and comforts of heaven are still in store, and until then, he will work good from such tragedy.

Think about that this Christmas. Turn to your God, who is with you, for comfort and guidance. You don't have to turn very far. We're only a few short days away from looking into the manger again so we might see this truth: there is Immanuel, God with us. He came to be our Savior by living in our place. That's God with us. He still comes each day with his blessings into our hearts through the means of grace. That's God with us. He will come again to take us to be with him forever. Yes, God is truly with us now and forevermore. Amen.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.