

Texts: Matthew 1.22 (cf. Isaiah 7.14)

December 24th, 2018 (Christmas Eve)

SPEAKING OF EMMANUEL

--“All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means ‘God is with us’.”

So writes the evangelist Matthew in his commentary concerning the birth of Jesus, inextricably linking Jesus’ nativity to prophetic utterance from seven centuries before.

The prophet to whom Matthew alludes is that of Isaiah, so frequently cited otherwise through the Advent season. The passage in question--which, interestingly, Matthew intentionally misquotes--actually reads: “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.”

A footnote to the main text in Isaiah provides the symbolical meaning of the name Immanuel--“God is with us.” It is a parenthetical note which Matthew incorporates directly into his principal narrative.

--On this occasion, what might we make of this Emmanuel/Immanuel?

As Christians, the “God who is with us” we know has to do, of course, with Jesus himself. That’s why the verse, in following Matthew’s interpretive lead, is often read on Christmas Eve. The expectation of the “God who will be with us” is understood to be fulfilled in the coming of Jesus.

Understand, Matthew doesn’t go so far as to call Jesus God (it’s a later gospel writer, John, who takes that step!), but Matthew does declare that, in Jesus, God is unmistakably, personally at work in the world.

In Matthew’s view, God sends Jesus as the anointed Son as the means of guiding the world, in a Moses-like manner, into a more faithful way of living. In Jesus’ wisdom and power and authority, we plainly see God’s values and priorities and directives. Therefore, the evangelist submits, Jesus should be regarded seriously, Jesus should be listened to, Jesus should be followed, for Jesus gives human expression to the “God who is among us.” Immanuel.

--And that’s where many a Christmas Eve message would end. With that, we could sing another carol, engage in the traditional candle-lighting ritual, fold up our bulletins and go home, leaving us with the sense that we have once again fulfilled our duty for the season.

That would be too bad, too, for in some pretty important ways, this is just the starting place (not that I plan on going on and on at this point in the night--isn’t that a relief?).

I would mention, though, that, if all the foregoing is in any sense true, then there is a step that must follow from it, and it is one that needs to be articulated, especially on a Christmas Eve. The

point is this: If we are the people of this Jesus, in fact taking him seriously, in fact listening to him, in fact following him, then we are the people of the “God who is with us,” the people of the “God who will be with us,” the people of the “God who is among us.”

--In short, the promise of “Immanuel” doesn’t begin and end simply with the person of Jesus. It has to do with every generation of believer who has ever come after him, including our own--and perhaps most personal of all, it has to do with those of us who are sitting in these comfortable pews on this wonder-filled night. If we are indeed the “Body of Christ,” come together in the wake of Jesus’ earthly life to carry forward his agenda, then the prophecies pertaining to him are prospects pertaining to that Body--meaning that the promise of “Immanuel” has to do, not just strictly with him, but significantly with you and me.

--That means that, like Jesus, we, too--as people who are called and empowered and guided by the “God who is with us”--are to be champions of God’s Way. Like Jesus, we are the eyes and ears, legs and hands of God in our own time. That’s what it means to be the Body of Christ--to be actively, compassionately at work in the world just as Jesus was. Immanuel.

It’s one of the central ironies in the Christian faith that, while we passionately believe that Jesus has already done it, Jesus is no doubt passionately hoping that someday we will get around to doing it, this genuine continuing of his work in the world. There’s a lot of work yet to be done.

If we excuse ourselves from doing that, then, no matter what lofty things we may believe about him, we fail him. If we absent ourselves from doing that, we become merely one more social organization and nothing more. In such a case, no matter how strenuously we think it to be so, we are not the Body of Christ.

On this Christmas Eve, the occasion of celebrating a humble yet momentous birth in a stable in Bethlehem, the occasion of ritually honoring the coming of the Light into a world where there is still far too much darkness, we need to be startled awake by the basic message: If we are truly the people of Immanuel, the people of the “God with us,” the people of the “God who will be with us,” the people of the “God who is among us,” then it is high time that we start behaving that way.

Don’t you think?