

ADVENT SERMON SERIES

CALL HIS NAME JESUS:

(4) GOD WITH US

Isaiah 7:10-14

Colossians 1:15-20

Matthew 1:18-23

Jeffrey S. Carlson

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SCRIPTURE

¹⁰Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. ¹²But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. ¹³Then Isaiah said: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴Therefore 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 (Isaiah 7:10-14 NRSV).

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:15-20 NRSV).

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³“Look, the

virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us” (Matthew 1:18-23 NRSV).

MESSAGE

How do people picture God in their minds? What do they think about God, if they think about God at all? Some people may picture him as he is often shown in cartoons and even in famous paintings – as an elderly man with white hair and a white beard, dressed in long, flowing robes and surrounded by angels. That grandfatherly figure is often thought to be kind and welcoming, a personality to match the grandfatherly image.

Other people may think of God as an angry, condemning judge, perhaps sitting on a throne ready to send sinners to judgment. He is not someone they want to meet, if they really believe he exists at all. Across the centuries and still today, many people and cultures are not content to imagine what God looks like. They turn created things such as the sun, moon or planets into gods to be worshiped, or they turn their imagined gods into figures of stone or wood or bronze. The prophet Isaiah mocks that kind of god. Listen to his description of the carpenter who makes himself the Creator and carves a god with his own hands: He cuts down cedars or chooses a holm tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. Then it can be used as fuel. Part of it he takes and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Then he makes a god and worships it, makes it a carved image and bows down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire; over this half he roasts meat, eats it and is satisfied. He also warms himself and says, “Ah, I am warm, I can feel the fire!” The rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, bows down to it and worships it; he prays to it and says, “Save me, for you are my god!” (Isaiah 44:14-17).

The carpenter turned worshiper seems entirely unaware of the fact that he is bowing down to the other half of his cooking fire. It is laughable, until we take a look at our own lives. Sometimes we worship things that don't look like grandfather figures or idols. Our god may at times look like money or power or popularity, whenever we put our ultimate trust in those things. We have our own false ideas about God, too, and there is nothing funny about that.

Even if we admit that we cannot truly picture God or imagine God's form, there is another question that people have about God, a question that we may have about God sometimes, too. We don't ask what God looks like, but what is he really like? What sort of God is God? The better question to ask is not what I think about God, but what does God think about me? Some people understand God to be angry and unforgiving, a kind of divine "killjoy" about everything, with all sorts of commandments and rules and demands. Others imagine just the opposite and think of God as friendly and warm, so

kind that he winks at sin, overlooking it because people try so hard to be good. This kind of God condones everything and is critical of no one. There is no need for Jesus and all that talk about blood and sacrifice and the cross.

We do not have to imagine or guess what God is like. He has told us what he is like, at least as much as our human understanding can grasp. He has revealed himself in his creation. He has revealed himself in his Word as our Creator, as the Triune God, as the Father of our Lord and – in Christ – as our Father. We don't have to wonder what he thinks about us. We have that answer in a familiar verse from his Word: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16). There is no guesswork involved. God himself took on human flesh; he was conceived in a virgin's womb and born as a helpless infant. If you want to see God, if you want to know what God is like, look into the manger in Bethlehem. That is where you will find him.

Most of us are familiar with the haunting Advent song, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," that is often sung at this time of year. Emmanuel is a personal name meaning, "God with us." It was the name to be given to the son to be born in Isaiah's prophecy to King Ahaz (Isa. 7:14) and later fulfilled in the birth of Jesus (Matt 1:22-23).

That newborn infant – that was the sign that the Old Testament King Ahaz didn't want to see. It was the sign that God gave him anyway. It was a sign of defeat for Ahaz's enemies and a gentle sign of comfort, a sign of the presence of God with his people. The sign was a virgin-born son who would be called Emmanuel, a name that tells us just who that virgin-born son is – God with us.

Joseph, who was engaged to be married to the virgin mother of that son, that holy sign, needed a sign of his own from God. Mary was expecting a child, and it was not Joseph's child. Joseph could marry his bride or he could divorce her, subjecting her to public shame and possibly even death. But Scripture tells us Joseph was a just man and unwilling to put Mary to shame. He decided to divorce her quietly and so at least preserve Mary's life, if not her reputation. But Joseph received the sign he needed, the sign that King Ahaz had rejected so long ago. God sent his angel to tell Joseph, "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." Mary's holy child was to be named Jesus, a name that means "God saves," because this child would save his people from their sins. This was the sign that Ahaz didn't want, the sign that God gave anyway. This was the sign that Joseph needed and received. This was the sign that we did not know we needed, but it was the sign that was given. This virgin-born Son is God in human flesh, God born among us as one of us. He is Emmanuel – God with us.

Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. Scripture tells us that in Jesus, "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." We don't have to guess or wonder. What is God like? Look to Jesus and you will see what God is like. What does God think of you? Look to Jesus, the Child of Bethlehem, the Lamb of God, the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world, for our sins. There you will see what God thinks of you; there you will see the love of God for you. As the apostle Paul writes, God was in Christ, reconciling all things to himself, making peace by the blood of his cross.

There is no guesswork, no imagination needed. If you want to see God, if you want to see what God thinks of you, look in the manger this Christmas. You will see him there. Jesus is God in the flesh, born for you. When the season of Lent arrives, look for him on the cross. You will see him there. Jesus is God in the flesh, who suffered the penalty of death for your sins. And then when Easter arrives, look for him in the empty tomb. You will not find him there! Jesus is God in the flesh, risen from the dead, so that he will be God with us, God with you, for all eternity.