



## DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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**To Know Him by Name—Immanuel – Jesus**

**CHRISTMAS EVE, December 24, 2009**

**Dr. Matthew J. Hook**

VIDEO CLIP: I love how the guy with the beard makes the connection between baby Jesus and with the rest of Jesus' life! But it's not the only connection... God allows Matthew the Tax Collector to connect all the events leading up to His birth. Matthew helps his 1<sup>st</sup> century readers understand this birth was a prophecy: *"So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: 23 'Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,' which is translated, 'God with us.' 24 Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, 25 and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name JESUS."*

We've been looking at Hebrew names for God this month. Each of God's names reveals a need, a promise. And while you may need God's name this Christmas to be "Gift Wrapping Dept" or "Betty Crocker" or "Some Assembly Required," the real Christmas story reveals a long-forgotten name of God. It may be the most difficult to believe: *Immanuel*—which means *God with us*. Is God really with us? Could God, the God of the universe, *really* be active in your life and mine? If you're like me, sometimes you look at your life, and it's so *random*. You look at the world, and *it's* all so random: People killed. Accidents. War. Genocide. Disasters. Downturns. Abuse. Drugs. Fighting. Pain. Maybe it really is random, and religion is just our best attempt to put all the pieces together. At some point, you push back and say "I don't know." Maybe God pushed the first domino, or lit the fuse of the Big Bang... But there's something inherent in you and me that wants to believe it's more than that. That our lives matter, and we're going somewhere. That maybe, just maybe, God's alive, and God really is with us.

The angel gives Mary God's name *Immanuel*. That name was first given 735 years before the birth. *Immanuel* means "with us is God." We sing about it, and make it poetry. But this name didn't come in some great Christmas-type celebration. It came during a *terrible* time for Israel. It may help you to know when this prophecy was made, when this name of God was given, it made no sense. And, it had absolutely *no* impact on the person it came to. It was spoken by the prophet Isaiah to King Ahaz, King of Judah. His country was falling apart. He was way past God. Ahaz had abandoned God's Temple worship. He created images of Baal in the Temple. He sacrificed infants to another god named Molech, including his own son. And Ahaz was facing neighboring armies moving in to attack.

In the midst of all that crud, God offered Ahaz hope. Through Isaiah, God says to Ahaz (this terrible king) "I'm giving you another chance. You can return to your faith. I'll give you a sign. Put your faith in me, and watch and see if I don't do something on your behalf. I'll even let *you* name the sign, and I'll show you.

But Ahaz says "I'm not buying it. I'm not changing how I do things. I'm not facing this invisible God I know nothing about!" (Sounds familiar. How many of us want to experience God but won't interrupt our lives and our plans for anything?) So Ahaz does his thing. But when the prophet hears this, he says to Ahaz since you wouldn't even *look* to God for a sign, *"the Lord Himself will give you a sign: (Ahaz thinks "This ought to be good... And Isaiah says) Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel..."* Ahaz must have been like 'that's it?! A girl's going to have a baby?' And the Hebrew word for virgin also meant "A young unmarried woman." So here's what he heard: God's great sign to you is "A young woman's going to have a baby! And here's the name—*Immanuel!*" And Ahaz is like "*That's the sign?*" It didn't change his mind a bit. Young women have babies all the time. (I think a lot of us think the

same thing about Christmas. “What’s the big deal?”)

And later Isaiah speaks it again: Isaiah 9: 6 “*For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*” Whoa now. *This* is brand new information. The baby that would be born would be referred to as “Mighty God?” Weird. And Ahaz shrugs it off. So it happens: Israel falls, is scattered, & ruined. BLANK-SLIDE. Eventually the huge Assyrian Empire takes Israel & Judah and it’s all over. It seems they’ll rule forever. But then the Babylonians conquer Assyria, and the Babylonians march everybody from Jerusalem to Babylon. God’s people are now scattered. And it’s over. But then comes the Persian Empire, for 300 years. The remaining Jews keep getting tromped. And along comes Alexander the Great, who runs off Darius the Persian King, and Greece conquers. Certainly *they’d* reign forever. But we know the Romans come along and conquer the entire Mediterranean world.

And the name Ahaz was long forgotten. The prophecies still didn’t make any sense. And the Jews began to wonder if maybe *they’d* been forgotten as well. (I think most of *us* wonder the same thing sometimes. Tough times and dry spells leave you feeling like you’ve been totally forgotten.) Historians even dub these centuries “The Silent Years.” No evidence, nowhere, no how. No trail, no trace. And the Jews had *no* economic leverage and *no* military leverage. Israel was nothing but a picked over vassal state for Rome. Where was God?! Where was the Messiah?! Where was *Immanuel*?! Listen...

“*And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria...*” Luke 2:1 – 2.

735some years later, *when nobody knows but God*—God sent the angel to Mary and said “*You’re* the girl, the woman spoken of long ago by the prophet.” And the angel came to Joseph in a dream: “*It’s her*; and though you haven’t been with her, she will give birth to a Son, and you will give him the name Jesus” which means *Jehovah is salvation*. She’ll be with child and will call him *Immanuel*, which means *God with us*. And though almost *no* one remembered the name, God was active the whole time. It was like God was saying all over: “I’m the God of nations, the God of history. I will accomplish my will, whether I’m invited to or not.”

3 *So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. 4 Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, 5 to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.*” Luke 2:1 – 7. And God was with us, invisible to all but a few peasants and some shepherds at that time...but He was there...

Can you really make a case for *Immanuel*—*God with us*? Look at it this way: If you were to ask my kids to build a case for my presence in their lives, of my willingness to act on their behalf, as their father; based on me doing what *they* want, *when* they want it, *how* they want me to do it, my kids may conclude that their father doesn’t exist; and he’s certainly not present; *if* that’s the basis of the case that they’re asked to make. I provide lots for them that they never think about. I’m working hard so they can live and grow and experience love. But *they* might not see it that way. And so it is with us. We’re asked to make a case for *Immanuel*, based on the activity and the presence and willingness of God to do what we ask him to do, the way that we want him to do it, in the time we give him to do it.

It’s no wonder that all of us at some stage of our lives to ask “God, are you even *active* in my life, let alone in the course of world events?!” Then we come to this incredible story of Christmas, when God speaks in an unmistakable way, right in the middle of history. He says “I am alive, I am active, I am a promise keeping God. Just as I promised the nation of Israel of old that there would be a Messiah, and just as I promised wicked Ahaz, one day a virgin would have a baby, and he would be called *Immanuel*, just as I said, and that he would be God, born in the form of a baby, called Jesus because he takes away sin; in that same way, you can trust me. I the LORD God am with you, always.”

Ahaz couldn’t hear it, with his choices and with the armies coming at him. Whoever it is *you* tend to fear; whatever terrible choices you’ve made, or been victim of, that cause you to wonder “God, can I trust you? Are you even there?” God says “Don’t be afraid. I’ve promised that I love you.” And from our vantage point,

2000 years later, God *has* given us a sign. The virgin was in fact with child, gave birth to a Son, and he was called *Immanuel*. And now, you can live every single day of your lives, knowing God-is-with-us. And that God is with you.

Isn't it amazing? That's why we celebrate Christmas. Bethlehem is a real place, with real people living real lives. And we celebrate tonight because it is about history, about real life. The God who invaded history, and our very real lives today; *God-with-us* has promised eternal life to us. And the promises kept in the past, will be the promises kept today. Whatever you are facing, know in the midst of them *Immanuel*, with us is God.

"Father, that's just amazing. Thank you for preserving these words for us. For 735 years and then over 2000 more years. Thank you for showing up in an unmistakable way in a feeding trough, a manger, 2000 years ago, for the men and women who say "I just need a sign today. I need something to base my confidence in today." That they would come face to face with the fact that You are the God who is with us, who keeps His promises; that they can really depend on You and your ways. Give us eyes to see this world the way You do. Because 2000 years ago, 5 miles from Jerusalem, a baby was born who was and still is Christ the Lord, *Immanuel, God with us*. It's in his name that we pray these things. Amen."