

Sermon File # 927

Scripture Text: Isaiah 7:14; 52:13-53:12

Sermon Title: *The Birth of Immanuel*

Manuscript written by Roger Roberts

Sermon preached at International Baptist Church, Brussels, Belgium

On Sunday morning, 5 December 2010

Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New International Version

For additional information regarding this manuscript, contact Roger.Roberts@ibcbrussels.org.

All Rights Reserved.

The Birth of Immanuel

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me, as we continue this series on to Isaiah's prophecy of the birth of Messiah, which we celebrate this Advent Season. Last Sunday we considered "Good News for a People in Darkness" from Isaiah 9:1-7, and today we'll look at one verse in Chapter 7 (14) and a longer passage in 52:13-53:12, which is perhaps the most amazing prophecy in the Old Testament about the passion and death of Christ.

The setting of verse 14 in Chapter 7 is Isaiah's prophecy to King Ahaz of Judah, urging him to refrain from trusting in the wicked nation of Assyria to defend him from the alliance of Israel and Syria, and to rather trust in the Lord to deliver the nation of Judah. Isaiah encouraged Ahaz to ask for a sign to assure him of the Lord's deliverance, but feigning piety, Ahaz refused. Despite Ahaz' stubborn refusal and unbelief, Isaiah said the Lord would nevertheless give a sign, which would be the birth of a child, who would be born of a young woman and would be named Immanuel, which means "God with us." The identity of this child and his parents is unknown. Perhaps he was a child of the prophet himself or born in Ahaz' royal household. The word "alma" means young woman, and also can mean young virgin. In the immediate context, the one who gave birth to this Immanuel in the 8th Century before Christ was not a virgin, but Matthew in his Gospel gives the perfect fulfillment of this prophecy by translating "alma" as "virgin," as the angel announced to Joseph that his

fiancée, the young Virgin Mary, would conceive miraculously and give birth to the Messiah, Immanuel, God with us (Matthew 1:23).

The second passage, 52:13-53:12, is the one that gives Isaiah the name of “the Fifth Gospel,” the passage that, for example, the Ethiopian official was reading when Philip came alongside him and preached to him “the good news about Jesus” (Acts 8:35).

Follow as I read these passages: **Isaiah 7:14; 52:13-53:12.**

A week or so I looked for Christmas cards to send particularly to family and relatives, and was unable to find anything particularly religious, in a Christian sense, that is. The closest thing to having a biblical theme were some flying angels, who seemed to be dispensing something like leaflets that contained a message that wasn't particularly biblical, saying in Dutch, “Prettige kerstfeest en gelukkig nieuwjaar,” which is roughly equivalent to the English “Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.” Unless you were to find a Christian bookstore or order online, you'd be hard pressed to find a Christmas message that has any reference to the cross of Christ. The image of the baby Jesus appears harmless and non-threatening, even to the most militant unbeliever.

Yet, when we look at the deeper meaning of Christmas, we see that a true celebration of the birth of Christ must include his suffering and death on the cross. Toward the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus was deeply troubled at the thought of the looming cross, which would mean ineffable suffering for him. He prayed,

“Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!” (John 12:27-28a).

Christ was born to live for us but mainly to die for us, which was the mission the Father had for him from before the creation of the world (Revelation 13:8). Old Simeon, when the baby Jesus was presented in the temple, told Mary that a sword would pierce her soul, referring to the agony of seeing her Son suffer and die on a cross (Luke 2:35).

Over 700 years before the birth of Jesus, Isaiah prophesied his birth and also his suffering and death, as we will see in our text. This Advent Season we celebrate the coming of the promised Messiah, the birth of Immanuel, which means, first of all, that...

God is with us

The word “Immanuel” literally means “God is with us” (as translated in the *New Living Translation*). At this critical time in Judah's history, the people were yearning for a redeemer, an ideal king, “who would carry out all of his promises” (GE Wright, *Isaiah*, 39). Speaking through his servant Isaiah, the Lord was willing to give King Ahaz a sign that he himself was with Judah to

deliver the nation from their enemies. But Ahaz refused to believe and thus forfeited God's offer of deliverance. The sign was given to Ahaz, but for him it would be a sign of judgment and not one of deliverance. In immediate fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, a son was born to a young woman...

According to plan

Just as a male child named Immanuel was born to a young woman as a sign to Ahaz, so the child Jesus was born to the Virgin Mary over 700 years later, and exactly according to God's plan.

God's plan was to enter a lost, sinful and broken world in order to make himself known and to rescue the world from its helpless and hopeless dilemma. God would enter the world through his Son, who would be incarnated, made human flesh, in order to deliver us (John 1:1-18). As Jesus himself announced, he came "to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10).

In the words of CS Lewis, the Incarnation is "the central miracle." If God can also be a man, then anything is possible, even the Resurrection of Jesus! As Paul wrote so eloquently in his hymn of the kenosis and pleroma, Christ emptied himself into the form of a servant and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross, an utterly shameful death (Philippians 2:5-11). Almighty God the Son, the Co-creator, stooped to utter humility and humiliation to rescue us from our lost-ness. He entered into our predicament and shared fully in our experiences, yet he remained sinless and perfectly obedient to the Father. Other world religions are attempts to "attain to the level of the gods," hoping to somehow reach them and placate them and meet their demands. Our Christian faith is one of accepting God's gracious condescension to reach and rescue us from our helpless and hopeless dilemma.

And Immanuel came to the world...

At the right time

The timing of the arrival of the child Immanuel was the time ordained by God to be a sign to King Ahaz, who placed his trust in the wicked king of Assyria, and as a result fell under God's judgment. Had Ahaz listened to God's sign warning, he would have repented of trusting Assyria in time to receive God's deliverance. The arrival of Immanuel, the Son of God, was also in God's perfect timing and according to his will.

Paul says that "when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons" (Galatians 4:4f). He's speaking of the context of our being given full rights as God's children, as former slaves adopted into the family of the heavenly Father (3:26-4:7).

Another translation says we were in spiritual bondage and slavery, "But when the right time came, God sent his Son...." (*New Living Translation*).

God came to the world in Christ at the right time, in fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Covenant, and when it was proven conclusively that God's people could not meet the requirements of the law by their own efforts. Christ also came to us at a time of spiritual darkness when our need for him was greatest.

And that's true of my story and yours as well. God knew the exact moment when we were ready to turn from self and cast ourselves on his mercy and grace. Whether it was as a youth or older adult, whether he came to us before we entered a life of sinful rebellion or when we had grown tired of our sin and self-centered living, Christ came when we realized our need for rescue.

Accessible to all

Christ came to us, not as a mighty warrior to overwhelm and force us to submission, but was born as a helpless infant, lived as a vulnerable and dependent man, and surrendered himself in total helplessness to his executioners.

The birth of Immanuel is the way the eternal God could make himself accessible and approachable. We can see the baby and now the man Jesus. And during his earthly ministry Jesus was utterly approachable, even by admitted sinners and social outcasts, who, interestingly, were the ones most drawn to Jesus. As E Stanley Jones, the great missionary statesman of the last century noted, had God revealed himself to us in his naked transcendence, we would have been terrified, if not devastated. But because he revealed himself in the God-Man Jesus, we could see God clothed in perfect holiness, wisdom and love.

It's difficult for us to imagine the lowliness of the Incarnation of the Son of God, who actually was not only born into humble circumstances, but also into a vulnerable and dangerous world. Not only had Mary and Joseph made the long journey to Bethlehem to register for Caesar's taxation, but when King Herod issued his murderous decree, they became refugees in Egypt (See Matthew 2). There's not a person in this worship center today who cannot relate to Jesus, to this God who is with us. Whatever your condition, he has stooped to your level to identify with you, to understand you and to rescue you.

The Incarnation is a miracle of essence, that God could become man. But it is also a miracle of willingness, that the eternal and transcendent God would become a man, that he would be willing to come to the rescue of us undeserving sinners, at such an ineffable cost to himself.

This Christmas we can celebrate because not only is God with us but also...

God is for us

As one notable Old Testament scholar said about the Suffering Servant passage in Isaiah 52:13-53:12, "In language of unspeakable force and beauty

the prophet has portrayed the great deliverance of the church” (Edward J Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, Volume III, Page 334). We celebrate because God is for us through...

The descent of the Cross

“His appearance was...disfigured beyond that of any man and his form beyond human likeness” (52:14).

Think of the birth pains of this young virgin girl, alone with an untrained husband, who probably knew nothing about childbirth. It doesn't take much to remind me what a coward I am when it comes to physical pain. Think about how people in the ancient world had to endure pain, not having all the medical sophistication that we enjoy in our culture and time. And Jesus' very birth required the suffering of others. When King Herod heard about his birth, he decreed the execution of all male babies in Palestine. His very birth brought suffering. It meant suffering. And in his brief life, Jesus suffered even all the physical pains we suffer. No doubt he had, without the benefit of medical assistance and pain relievers, a lot of bouts with painful illness. Scripture is clear that he shared in our weakness and in the totality of the human experience.

I wonder what might have gone through Mary's mind as she looked into the face of the baby Jesus when he cried from discomfort or hunger. She would have no idea of the suffering her Son would endure some day, perhaps only when at the sight of the Crucifixion did she think of old Simeon's dire prophecy (Luke 2:35). And every day of his 33 years on earth brought Jesus closer to the cross. It was such a horrendous prospect for him that as the time drew nearer Jesus cried to the Father to deliver him, if possible, from such a horrible fate. But realizing once again that the cross was his mission for God's glory, he submitted to its ineffable eventuality (John 12:27-28; Hebrews 12:2). Mary was at the sight of the Crucifixion, and no doubt saw Jesus during his agony. Perhaps she was reminded of the first grimaces that were so familiar to her when he was a newborn. As CH Spurgeon once said, it is impossible to overestimate the agony of the cross of Jesus. And when we have contemplated the Scripture and tried to imagine Christ's sufferings, we still have not accounted for the truth that the greater suffering of Jesus was in his sin bearing, his becoming our substitute in his suffering the wrath of God against sinners.

Isaiah 53:4-6 is loaded with personal pronouns: *our*, *we*, *us* and then *him*. The suffering Messiah, Jesus, suffered the cross because of and for us. In verse 6 we read that “we all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.” Sheep are basically stupid animals, and have to be protected from their own folly and oblivion to danger. And sin is fundamentally stupid and eventually self-destructive.

The famous passion play in Oberammergau, Germany was performed from April to October of this year, as it is done every 10 years. A vow was made by the villagers in 1634, who were spared the devastation of the bubonic plague,

that they would perform this drama of the crucifixion every ten years in response to God's deliverance. In 1984, changes were made in the script in response to a furor over the fact that the play focused on the role of the Jews in the crucifixion and thus incited anti-Semitism.

The fact is, there were direct players in the drama of the cross—Jewish religious leaders, Roman officials and soldiers, and the mob that cried “crucify him!” But had the Incarnation been in our day, the players would have been different—perhaps including religious leaders in Christendom, US or European, African, Asian or Middle Eastern soldiers. And a mob of people that might have included you and me, had we been on the scene. The fact is, Jesus died for you and me. We share in the guilt because we needed what he alone could do for us. He didn't eradicate and atone for our sin and guilt through a judicial decree or political process or military power. He took up our infirmities, carried our sorrows and took our punishment we so richly deserved. He did this by being stricken, pierced, crushed and wounded beyond our comprehension. Because we desperately needed the cross of Christ, we are guilty of his crucifixion.

It was substitution. He carried our sins, suffered in our place, somewhat like Father Maximilian Kolbe, the Polish Franciscan, a prisoner in the Auschwitz concentration camp. “When a number of prisoners were selected for execution, and one of them shouted that he was a married man with children, Father Kolbe stepped forward and asked if he could take the condemned man's place. His offer was accepted by the authorities, and he was placed in an under ground cell, where he was left to die of starvation” (John RW Stott).

Only the eternal, sinless Son of God could be the acceptable sacrifice for you and me. He stepped onto history's stage and said, “I'll take their place in taking the punishment they deserve.”

The power of the Cross

Right here in the midst of our passage about the Suffering Servant Messiah, we read about “the arm of the Lord” having been revealed (53:1).

Our concepts of power are no different than they were in Jesus' day, when his disciples had difficulty accepting the way of a cross. We give our children “action figure” toys of super heroes, who rescue and conquer by great feats of supernatural power. We learn the values of political, economic and military power to secure national interests and to maintain a peaceful and stable society. We learn that strong, forceful and persuasive personalities are likely to advance in careers, and even education is pitched toward information that will give power over others. Meek is equal to weak, and we are taught from childhood to not be a doormat, or let others take advantage of us.

So, what does it mean to us that our Messiah, our Savior and Lord, was born in a manger in Bethlehem to a young refugee girl seeking shelter in a borrowed cattle stall? What does it mean that the eternal Son of God became a zygote, and was delivered into mortal life in the dangerous conditions of an

animal stall cave in Bethlehem? And beyond that, what does it say to us that the one we call our Master and Lord, the Co-Creator who reigns over this universe, was rejected by the religious establishment of his day, and unjustly tried and crucified as an imposter and blasphemer?

All of this means that the arm of the Lord, the only way for our deliverance from the trap of sin and death, was through the suffering of Almighty God. This was the way he chose to overcome Satan and defeat his kingdom—through the suffering and death of our Savior.

The way of the Cross

God said in effect, I will accept the death of my Son for sinners. “It was the Lord’s will to crush him” (Isaiah 53:10). Jesus agonized over the cross, and in the Garden of Gethsemane received his final peace and assurance that the cross was the only way by which this sinful world could be saved. Sin equals suffering someday, by somebody. And so Christ suffered the just penalty for all sinners who would believe in him. His death would be the way Satan’s kingdom would fall from heaven. When Jesus was suffering and dying on the cross, Satan thought he had won. But suddenly the tide of the battle turned. What looked like defeat became glorious victory, when Jesus cried, “It is finished!” (John 19:30). That was D Day in heaven. Three days later, when Christ arose from the grave, was VE Day.

So, suffering in this fallen world in a strange way is God’s will. Suffering was the consequence of the Fall, and now is normative in this fallen world. Yet it is also the way to victory, God’s strange way to victory. It was the way for God to win victory for his kingdom. And it’s the way he has for us. He invites his followers to take the way of the cross, one of self-denial and suffering in his steps. It’s the pattern for strange victory in this fallen world. Everyone must share it. Without suffering, no one can gain entrance into the kingdom (Acts 14:22). And suffering becomes our witness to the sufferings and victory of Christ. In the midst of the suffering of our Savior, he saw the light of life and was satisfied (Isaiah 53:11). He knew that after this battle on the cross he would gain the spoils of the souls of his redeemed (Isaiah 53:12). So our text ends on a note of triumph. We are called to share in the sufferings of Christ, not in living passively, but rather to join with Christ in his kingdom work of bringing saving grace and God’s justice to this fallen world.

The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was the key leader in the civil rights movement in America, who was assassinated in Memphis, TN on 4 April 1968. King was the son of an African American Baptist pastor in Atlanta, Georgia. His grandfather and his great-grandfather were also Baptist preachers. And so, he also, following this noble succession, attended college, seminary and graduate school and became pastor of a prominent African American church in Montgomery, Alabama in 1954. In 1956, while he was in the midst of his pursuit of “denominational fame and fortune” as pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Martin Luther King Jr. was called of God (Page 11, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, from the Civil Rights Movement to Today*, by Charles Marsh). Trouble was brewing because

African Americans in the city of Montgomery believed they should have equal rights with whites, including the right to sit where they wished on city buses. King didn't want to become involved, but God had other plans for him. God was calling King into service for civil rights and non-violent advocacy for racial equality in America. Regardless of how historians regard Martin Luther King, no one doubts that he became the key figure in this struggle for racial integration in America.

But the fact is, although King was reared and schooled in the Christian faith, had graduated from college and theological seminary, and was completing his Ph.D. in theology, he was missing a living encounter with Immanuel, God with us. Young Pastor King had become involved as a civil rights leader in the racial controversy in Montgomery, and as a result began to receive death threats from racial bigots, up to as many as 30 or 40 per day.

Late one night King, overcome by fear, got out of bed and began pacing the floor, asking God to show him a way out of his involvement in this now dangerous cause. He thought of his own safety, but primarily of his wife and baby. He realized that all his human support, from his pastor father and loving family and friends meant nothing to him in the face of his current danger. He sat down alone, late at night, at his kitchen table, buried his face in his hands and called out to God:

"Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I still think I'm right. I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now, I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage. Now, I am afraid. And I can't let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone" (Page 32, Marsh, above reference).

As King prayed alone in the kitchen that night, according to Charles Marsh, he heard a voice. The voice said, "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you. Even unto the end of the world." King heard the voice of Jesus saying to "fight on." Quoting the old Gospel song, King said that the Lord Jesus "promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone." According to the writer of this account, King noted that this promise "washed over the stains of the wretched" callers who had threatened him, and led him to "a spiritual shore beyond fear and apprehension." Said he, "I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything" (Page 32, Marsh, above reference).

Conclusion:

Christmas means a cross. But not just for Jesus, but for us too. The joy comes at the cost of suffering. Jesus told his disciples that there would be the

time of pain and weeping, but that their grief would turn into joy. And he compared this to a woman's birth pains, but then the relieved joy of the birth of the child when the anguish is forgotten (John 16:20-21). Christmas joy comes at a cost, our willingness to share in his sufferings, and to take the way of self-denial and participation in his sufferings—rejection, being misunderstood, unappreciated, forgotten, opposed, overlooked and even mistreated. And as Christians, we share in the common grieves of humanity, such as physical pain and emotional sorrow. How we carry our pain and sorrow becomes our witness to the world of the grace of God.

As we were reminded last night at the prayer service by a representative from Open Doors, some of our brothers and sisters are suffering overt persecution for their faith in Christ, and even some will, perhaps still this year and next, be faithful witnesses unto death by martyrdom. Around the first Christmas crèche there were sounds of pain but also of joy and wonder. The birth brought sorrow from the cross, but also victory promised by the final outcome, which was not Jesus' death but his resurrection.

So too, our victory in him is assured by his resurrection, which is the promise of our victory and resurrection. Even in this life of trial and suffering, there is the reality of resurrection power and sustaining grace for now, and the promise of everlasting vindication and reward.

Martin Luther King said that the crisis of his cross bearing was the time when faith and Jesus and God became real to him. His faith came alive because he experienced and trusted in Immanuel, God with us. Like Martin Luther King Jr., you and I need to come to a crisis moment when we experience Immanuel, God with us. Like him, we must realize our total helplessness apart from his grace. We must cast ourselves upon his mercy to forgive us our sins and to give us the free gift of eternal life. By placing our trust in God through Jesus Christ, Immanuel, he comes to live and abide with us, our Lord Immanuel (*O Little Town of Bethlehem*, verse 4, by Phillips Brooks).

You can have Christmas cards without the cross but you cannot have Christmas without the cross. The crying baby in the crèche is a harbinger of the tears of Jesus in Gethsemane. But beyond the cross was the joy that was set before him (Hebrews 12:2). Join me in a time of giving thanks as we partake of this Eucharistic celebration of the Last Supper which Jesus gave us as a memorial of his death for us. In this observance God blends together for us the suffering and joy of his birth, death and gift to us of eternal life.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. Do you agree that a celebration of Advent without thought of the cross of Christ is incomplete? Why or why not?

2. Why is it important that God is with us?
3. Do you agree with CS Lewis that the incarnation of Christ is the central miracle? Why or why not?
4. Isaiah promised King Ahaz that a child named Immanuel would be born at the right time to give a sign of God's deliverance of the nation. Paul said that the Son of God, Immanuel, was born at the right time (Galatians 4:4). Why was it the right time in history? Did you come to faith in Christ "at the right time?" If so, why was it the right time for you?
5. How do the circumstances of Jesus' humble birth show that he was and is accessible to everyone, regardless of social position?
6. What does the suffering of the Messiah prophesied in Isaiah 52:13-53:12 say about our spiritual condition and need?
7. What is the way of the cross that we are called to follow? Reflect on what this means to you.

All Rights Reserved.