

GOD WITH US
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University Congregational Church
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Reading: Isaiah 7: 13 – 17 (NRSV)

Then Isaiah said, “Hear then, you house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? 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. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day the Ephraim departed from Judah, the King of Assyria.

During the Christmas season it is the custom of Christian churches to read the birth stories of Matthew and Luke. It is common to read from Matthew’s gospel the words of the angel who informs Joseph in a dream that Mary would conceive by the power of the Holy Spirit. Matthew writes, “All of this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will be with the child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel,’ which means, God with us.”

The prophet, of course, was Isaiah, whose words I just read to you. The problem with Matthew’s use of the prophet is two-fold. In the first place the correct reading of the Hebrew does not use the word “virgin.” The Hebrew word is *almah*, which means “young woman.” But many

translations continue to use the word virgin and interpret Isaiah's words as a prophecy of the birth of the Messiah. That is clearly what Matthew did.

The second and more important issue is the context of Isaiah's words, which renders the name "Immanuel" a significantly more radical meaning. Briefly the situation that Isaiah confronts is a political threat to the house of David. On the throne sits King Ahaz whose reputation is less than stellar. Ahaz and Jerusalem are under threatening siege and the king is contemplating a protective alliance with Assyria. He empties the court and temple treasuries and sacrifices his son by fire to pay for this alliance.

Isaiah calls for Ahaz to be courageous and hold faith in the power of God to overcome evil. Ahaz completely rejects this plea. His story is one of fearfulness, disobedience, and lack of trust. He will do what is expedient at the moment and it is this lack of faith that will put the nation in jeopardy.

Isaiah tries to warn the king that disaster will be immediate, as quickly as a young woman can conceive and birth a child. Before that child is grown up the distrust of Ahaz will be bitter food for Judah.

The child's name will be "Immanuel," which means "God with us." In other words, the powerful intentions of God's wholeness are at work in human history. We do not compromise the values of freedom to any other

power on earth. We do not submit our will to the domination of any other force for the immediate relief of fear. We do not sell our dignity for the pottage of immediate gratification, even if it is relief from the threat of terrorism. The alliance with Assyria represents an alliance with death. Ahaz will give in to the very imperial powers of dominion that subjugate the most treasured values that characterize God's people.

Immanuel, suggests Isaiah, is as immediate as the birth and maturation, not only of future generations, but the generation that today conceives of the future. Before a child knows the difference between right and wrong our compromise with power will bring the nation down. Isaiah insists that God is with us and we must finally trust in the wholeness of justice, compassion, and right relationships. The strength of God's justice is at work in the world and we dare not roll over and surrender regardless of the threat that confronts us. This is the metaphor that Isaiah holds before Ahaz in the hope that the spineless king will grab the brass ring of God's presence.

The fact that God is with us does not mean that we will not suffer or even suffer defeat. But if we finally trust in and front the universal rights of every human being justice will prevail. We will have to work for it and we may even have to defend it. But under no circumstances dare

we subjugate ourselves to or give up the dignity of human freedom to any other person or nation state. When we bow our knees to any form of tyranny, be it political, economic, social, or religious we not only commit the idolatry of power but we abandon the essence of what it means to be a human being. Let me tell you a story of Immanuel.

The family of Julian Bilecki was woven of simple people of faith and goodwill. They were well known in the town of Zawalow. Under Adolf Hitler's plan of Jewish extermination Jews were held captive in ghettos. One of those ghettos was Podhajce. Naturally, the Jews would try to escape the ghetto but if caught they were subject to execution. One family managed to flee from the ghetto by hiding in a cartload of dead bodies. They went to the Bilecki family in the hope they would be protected. One survivor reported, "We had no choice, and we hoped that they would not report us. We said, 'Here we are, help us,' and they helped us."

In fact the Bileckis helped 23 Jews by hiding them in a bunker on their property until the end of the war when the Russians liberated Poland. The Bileckis also risked execution on the spot had they been caught sheltering them. They also brought the Jews food throughout the duration. In the winter they wondered how they would get food to the

bunker without leaving a trail in the snow. Their solution was to leap from tree to tree with food supplies in their pockets and knapsacks. The survivors say that the Bileckis also gave them deep moral support.

One survivor, Mrs. Grau Schnitzer said of the Julian Bilecki and his family, “They had a heart, they were humanitarians...”¹

Immanuel is God with us. And God is with us in the countless stories of fidelity to basic human life and values. God is with us in the infinite number of women and men who risk their time, their help and maybe even their lives serving others in need. God is with us in the daily acts of courageous refusal to be swept away by violence in its myriad manifestations – in Iraq, on television, during family abuse, unfair labor practices, and the countless assaults on the human souls by consumerism. God is with us in the gentle hands of people like you who help build Habitat for Humanity houses, buy Christmas gifts for needy families, or drop a few dollars in the Salvation Army kettle outside of Walmart.

Ahaz could not see beyond the immediate treat and the wave of fear it presented to him. Nor could he see the hands of God moving in human history.

¹ This story was taken from information available at www.holocaustforgotten.com/bilecki.html.

We celebrate Christmas and gather around the cradle to be reminded of Immanuel. We need the courage and the faith that the birth of a child inspires, the Good News that God is with us.

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