

Session 3

Incarnation: Rediscovering the Significance of Christmas

By Adam Hamilton

Chapter 3: “Emmanuel in the Midst of a Pandemic”

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Introduction Recap...

The word “incarnation” comes from a Latin word that means, “embodiment” or “become flesh”. One of the foundational beliefs of Christians is in the incarnation, that God actually became flesh in the person of Jesus. The church has struggled throughout centuries to explain the “how” of this mystery. Instead of focusing on the “how”, Hamilton in this book seeks to answer the questions “why” and “to what end” for Christians today.

Some of the questions that will be asked include:

- Why would God come to us in Jesus?
- What was the purpose of the Incarnation?
- How are we meant to respond to the Incarnation, to God’s coming to us in Jesus, today?

In each chapter, Hamilton will focus on one or more names/titles used by the Gospel writers as they introduce the story of Jesus. Hamilton encourages each of us to read one chapter each week during the Season of Advent, with the Epilogue read after Christmas Day or during Epiphany Sunday.

Opening Activity – How is the 2020 Advent/Christmas Season Different?

- **In what ways are/will the Advent and Christmas Season different this year from years past?**
- **How has marketing/advertising on TV, radio, internet, etc. been different?**
- **Have you ever wanted to change your name? If so, what would you change it to and why?**

In this week’s chapter, Adam Hamilton looks at the name Emmanuel, “God with us,” and how it was given and served as a message of hope at times of great sadness, doubt, and fear – both in the Old and New Testament. How can it serve as a source of hope in this time of the pandemic in 2020?

Chapter 2 Recap...

At the time of writing this book, Adam Hamilton was experiencing the early days/months of the COVID-19 pandemic. He shares that at the time of printing and reading this book, the experience of the pandemic would be much deeper. At that time, essential services and functions were maintained, but many others things had essentially shut down. “America had closed.” (p.87) While some spoke of the closings as hype and hysteria, the CDC looked at the worst-case scenario where as many as 1.7 million Americans, mostly over the age of 60, might die as a result. There was concern that hospitals would be filled to the max. “Fear and panic are in the air as I write these words.” (p. 88)

As we continue through this study in week three, those same words can be echoed – “Fear and panic are in the air.” What can we learn from scripture about the emotions felt in this time of pandemic during this Advent season? In biblical times, pandemics were referred to as “pestilences” or “plagues”. These events are mentioned over 50 times in the Bible. The biblical writers did not know about germs, so when faced with a disease outbreak, the only conclusion was that this rapidly spreading illness must have been the work of God. Some individuals are saying the same thing today – the pandemic must be the will of God. However, today we have a greater understanding of viruses, how they mutate, and how they spread. If we believe God sent these viruses, then aren’t researchers and doctors who are striving to prevent and fight the viruses fighting against God? We do not believe this though...we do not believe the deaths of children, parents, and grandparents are God’s will.

“I do not believe that God sent the coronavirus, but I do believe he is with us in the midst of this pandemic, doing what God always does – comforting, leading, consoling, and wringing good from the adversity and pain.” (p. 90) Even in the midst of a pandemic, there is good – life, hope, goodness, and love.

What does the pandemic have to do with Advent and Christmas? A lot! Just as fear is in the air now, it was prevalent in the lives of God’s people in the Bible. God, an angel, a prophet, or even Jesus himself echoes over 100 times the words, “Don’t be afraid,”. Why not fear? Because “God is with us.” This is the message at the heart of the Christmas story – it is essentially Incarnation. The God who has always been with his people has come to us in the flesh, Jesus. In Matthew chapter 1, these words are repeated, “Look, the virgin shall conceive

and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, “God is with us.”

The gospel writer was connecting with the words written/spoken by Isaiah hundreds of years before. What a powerful connection! No other gospel writer connects these words to Jesus. What did Isaiah mean when he said these words? Why did Matthew use it to refer to Jesus? What does it mean for us today?

Let us look at a little Old Testament history. 735 years before the birth of Jesus, the kingdom of Israel was divided into two. The Northern Kingdom (which included 9 of the 12 original tribes) retained the name Israel, yet rejected Solomon’s son, Rehoboam, as king. The prophets sometimes refer to this kingdom as Ephraim – the tribe’s land that contained the capital city - or Samaria (the capital city of Ephraim). The Southern Kingdom was called Judah (included three tribes) after the largest and most dominant tribe of the region. The capital city was Jerusalem, and they remained faithful to Rehoboam as their king. Levites traveled to both Israel and Judah to serve the religious needs of the communities.

By the time of Isaiah, the Kingdoms had been split for 200 years. The Northern and Southern Kingdoms still had similarities at this time, even serving as military allies to fight a common enemy. Other times, they fought each other! In 735 BC, Israel formed an alliance with the kingdom of Aram. These two kingdoms hoped to rebel against the superpower of the day, the Assyrians. To succeed, they needed the help of Judah. However, King Ahaz (the king of Judah) refused. As a result, Israel and Aram prepared to attack Judah instead, kill Ahaz, and install a king that would support them. Ahaz, along with the people of Judah, were afraid. Therefore, God sent Isaiah to Ahaz to comfort him.

Isaiah told Ahaz not to be afraid of these “two smoldering stumps” – Judah and Aram. As long as Ahaz remained firm in his faith, harm would not come to him/them. God tells Ahaz to ask him for a sign as proof, yet Ahaz refused. God’s response through Isaiah was this, “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.” (Isaiah 7:14-16)

The date of these words are between 735 or 734 BC. Just as the prophecy foretold, a young woman gave birth to a son. We are not sure if this was a young

woman married to Ahaz or a new wife of Isaiah. She would become pregnant, give birth, and name her son Immanuel – “God is with us”. The child would serve as a visible sign of God’s promise to Ahaz. Before the boy is old enough to know right or wrong – whether the age of three or four, or a young man at twelve or thirteen – the two kings and their kingdoms will be abandoned.

In 732 BC, Assyria attacked Aram and Israel, relocating many back to Assyria. In 722 BC, the Assyrian army marched on Israel and destroyed it. In 720 BC, Aram was destroyed as well by Assyria. The prophecy had been fulfilled in Isaiah’s time.

Isaiah was one of the most prominent books of the Hebrew Bible for Jesus and the early church. 60 allusions or quotations from Isaiah are mentioned in the New Testament. Much of what Isaiah was prophesying was referring to his date and time in history. His prophecies showed how God was about to work in the period it was written. However, every generation of Jew that followed looked at his words in light of their own time, picturing how God might work to address the needs in their community. Early Christians would do the same thing. This is how Matthew, the author of the gospel and growing in a Jewish heritage, would read Isaiah 7:14 and the promise of Immanuel.

In Matthew’s birth story of Jesus, the “birth” only takes up five words – “she has borne a son.” The rest of the story focuses on Joseph, and the Annunciation by the angel to him. The role of the Holy Spirit is emphasized twice. Matthew then draws on the words of Isaiah 7:14, “...they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, “God is with us.” For Matthew, the first Immanuel – the child born in Isaiah’s time – was a foreshadowing of Jesus. Nowhere are we told that Mary called Jesus, “Emmanuel”. The only time in the New Testament that Jesus is referred to that name is here. “Matthew alone found in this somewhat obscure verse a powerful picture of who Jesus is and why he came.” (p. 100)

Matthew’s emphasis on the Holy Spirit seems to be his way of pointing to this unique identity. By this conception, the child – Jesus – would be both Son of Man and Son of God (fully human, fully divine). 17 times in Matthew is Jesus referred to as the “Son of God” – a big emphasis! Whether at baptism, the Transfiguration, temptations in the wilderness, encounters with demons, and even in his own prayers, Jesus accepts the label as “Son of God”. Throughout the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is shown doing what we would expect God to do –

heals the sick, opens the eyes of the blind, forgives sinners, feeds the multitude, and even raises the dead. In a way that was never fully true in Isaiah's time, God was with us in THIS Emmanuel, Jesus.

Incarnation – God taking on flesh and entering our world as a human being – is seen in Jesus. God became human in Jesus. He experienced what we experience as humans – good and bad. “There is something profoundly moving about God actually knowing what we are experiencing as humans.” (p. 102) God does not just imagine what it is like to be human – in Jesus, he became flesh. Paul describes it as “emptying himself” in Philippians 2. He experienced the good. He experienced the bad. In it all, Hebrews 4 says that Jesus “was tested as we are, yet without sin.”

When we come to God, pouring out our experiences and needs to God, we pray to the One who knows! This is the power of the Incarnation. The very idea of God showing up in the form of humanity is not a foreign concept to grasp. Songs, movies, and TV shows have personified this thought. In most of these, God APPEARS in human form. However, scripture reveals that God in Jesus did not just assume human appearance, but in some mysterious way, was born and lived as a human being.

God created the universe, stands outside and beyond it, while at the same time permeating it all. He animates, sustains, and holds it all together. Moses once said to God, “Show me your glory.” In response, God states that he could not handle it! The psalmist proclaims that the “heavens are telling the glory of God.” We can see reflections of God all around us. So many of these are beyond our comprehension, and many still desire to “see” God. God came to us in a way that we could see him and understand him – he came as Jesus. When we often picture what God is like – His character, love, grace, etc. – we often see Jesus. “When I pray, I pray to the God who showed me what God is like, thanks to all the ways that Jesus revealed God's heart. This is what Emmanuel means.” (p. 109)

In Matthew's Gospel, he begins by saying that Jesus is Emmanuel, “God is with us.” In the end of his Gospel, he shares that words that He will be with us “to the end of the age.” It is not just that God “was” with us, but Jesus “continues” to be with us. He is Emmanuel in the present. This gives us strength, peace, and love each day. Since He is with us, we need not fear – even in the midst of a pandemic. The Incarnation was God's way of showing us that He is with us. In Jesus, God came to be with us in times of fear, struggle, and pain.

While Jesus came to incarnate God's presence with humanity, before he left, Jesus called us to do the same thing in His name. As the "body of Christ", we are called to put flesh on the invisible God – through our words and our actions – to incarnate God to the world. "We are the ongoing incarnation." (p. 112) In the midst of this COVID-19 pandemic, we are called to follow Emmanuel and incarnate his presence, compassion, and love to others. Jesus is God with us. Because he is Emmanuel, Jesus knows and understands us inside and out. Because he is Emmanuel, Jesus is able to show us who and what God is like. Because he is Emmanuel, Jesus seeks to remind us that he is always with us and we do not need to be afraid. As Emmanuel, Jesus calls us to go in his name to others to share His love.

Follow Up Questions...

- Has there been a time in your life when you found a different or additional meaning – maybe in a song, poem, story, or artwork – with something that you have long been familiar?
- Did these new or extra meanings invalidate ones you previously had? Why or why not?

Scripture Focus – Isaiah 7:1-16

1. Why were King Ahaz and his subjects feeling afraid?
2. Why does Isaiah compare the enemy kings to smoldering stumps (vs. 4)?
3. Isaiah urges Ahaz to rely on God and not on military allies, telling him, "If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all." (vs. 9) When you feel afraid, who or what are you tempted to rely on rather than God? What does "standing firm in our faith" look like practically in times of fear and panic, like a pandemic?
4. Ahaz refused to test God. What sign does God promise through Isaiah and how is it meant to address Ahaz's fear?
5. How does the name of the child who will be born underscore his birth as a reason not to fear?

Scripture Focus – Matthew 1:22-25

1. What new and different meaning does Matthew find in Isaiah's centuries-old message for King Ahaz?
2. Why might Joseph have been feeling afraid?
3. Matthew describes Jesus's birth as a profound fulfillment of Isaiah's words. How does identifying Jesus as Emmanuel add to the importance of the sign God gave King Ahaz?

Scripture Focus – Hebrews 1:1-4, 4:14-16

1. What, specifically, does the author of Hebrews mean by calling Jesus God's Son? Why does Jesus's identity as God's Son matter to us?
2. How does Jesus, God's Son, allow us to see God? What distinguishes him from idols?
3. In your personal faith, do you tend to think of God as distant and judgmental, or as approachable and sympathetic to you? Why?
4. How do you respond to the idea that, because of the Incarnation, God is, as Hamilton writes, a God who has "experienced what we experience as humans? In Jesus, God experienced temptation, love, hunger, joy, fear, friendship, grief, doubt, rejection, a sense of abandonment by God, and death"?

Closing Activity..."Incarnate" in the World

This week, look for examples – in the newspaper, news, online, etc. – of persons showing love to others in ways that remind participants of God's love, as given flesh in Jesus's life.

How do these examples inspire you to "put flesh on" God's love for others this Advent and Christmas season, especially those living in sadness, doubt, and fear during this pandemic?

Closing Prayer (Read in Unison)

Oh God, how grateful we are that you came to us in Jesus Christ, our Emmanuel. You understand our humanity, our fears, our weaknesses, our succumbing to sin, those moments when we are less than what you wish us to be. You understand our love, our hurts, and our pain. You understand our struggle with grief and death. Thank you for revealing yourself to us in Jesus, that we might know who you are and that we might walk with you and love you all of our days. Lord, use me to be Emmanuel for those who don't know you. Help me to incarnate your love and grace to all that I meet. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Next Week

***"Incarnation"* Session Four**

Wednesday, December 23 6:30 PM Facebook Live

Reading – Chapter 4 in *"Incarnation"* – "The Light of the World"

Scripture – John 1:1-5, 9-14, Isaiah 58:1-10, Matthew 2:7-12, Matthew 5:14-16