

Title: Immanuel – God With Us

Text: Matthew 1:22-23

Matthew: The Story of the King

The Good News of the Kingdom of Heaven:

One picture says it all.

The day was August 14, 1945. The place was Times Square. The reason: President Harry Truman had just announced that the war with Japan was over. People streamed out into the streets of New York City to celebrate. Among them was a photographer named Alfred Eisenstaedt.

He tells what happened this way:

In Times Square on V.J. Day I saw a sailor running along the street grabbing any and every girl in sight. Whether she was a grandmother, stout, thin, old, didn't make a difference. I was running ahead of him with my [Leica](#) looking back over my shoulder but none of the pictures that were possible pleased me. Then suddenly, in a flash, I saw something white being grabbed. I turned around and clicked the moment the sailor kissed the nurse....People tell me that when I am in heaven they will remember this picture." (Alfred Eisenstaedt, as quoted in Wikipedia, "V-J Day in Times Square")

The end of World War II was witnessed by the hundreds of sailors and dignitaries who crowded the decks of the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay. It was an event that affected every nation and every people in the entire world. But if you want to know what it felt like to be an *American* who had just learned that the long war was over, all you need is one picture. That one picture says it all.

Matthew: The Story of the King:

The story of Jesus is likewise a story that can be told and experienced on many levels. We have seen how Mark tells the story of Jesus from the perspective of direct eye-witness reporting. Last week we saw how Luke took great pains to anchor the story of Jesus in the world and culture of his time. Matthew brings the story home – like the iconic photograph from Times Square. Matthew tells what it's like when the King at last comes to His people.

Long-standing tradition links this gospel to the disciple Matthew. It is written with a clear focus on the Jewish heritage of the early church. With its five major sermons or discourses, it provides Christians with a New Torah that is appropriate to the New Covenant.

Matthew's focus, from the very beginning of his gospel to its last words, is to anchor Jesus within the story of Israel and to present Him as the long-awaited King of the Jews.

Matthew's Christmas Story:

The gospel begins with a genealogy that assures us of Jesus' pedigree. He is a child of Abraham and a descendant of King David. He is the Christ, the Messiah.

Matthew tells the Christmas Story from the perspective of those living in Palestine. There is no mention of Caesar or Rome. The earthly king in the story is Herod. The forces of evil that would destroy the infant Jesus come from within. The great wide world comes to Jerusalem in search of the King. The story is carried forward by references to ancient Jewish prophecies. This is the story of Christmas from the perspective of Jesus' home people and home country. This is a story anchored in the great story of God and His people Israel and how they will respond to their King.

Bad Kings/Bad Times

Put to the test:

The kings of ancient Israel were a mixed bag: a few of them truly loved and served God; far too many went chasing after the various gods of the cultures around them.. One such corrupt and evil king was named Ahaz. He went so far as to sacrifice his own son to a pagan deity, and to convert the temple in Jerusalem into a pagan sanctuary. The writer of 2 Kings sums up Ahaz with these words:

2 Kings 16:2 NIV

Ahaz was twenty years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem sixteen years. Unlike David his father, he did not do what was right in the eyes of the LORD his God.

Early in his reign Ahaz was attacked by two kings from the north. Ahaz was terrified that he would lose his kingdom. It was at this time that the prophet Isaiah was sent by God to give Ahaz a word of direction and hope. Isaiah's message: The kings that terrified Ahaz were nothing before God. Isaiah challenged Ahaz to put his trust in God to deliver him:

Isaiah 7:9 NIV

*“The head of Ephraim is Samaria,
and the head of Samaria is only Remaliah's son.
If you do not stand firm in your faith,
you will not stand at all.”*

Then the LORD gave a second message to Ahaz:

Isaiah 7:11 NIV

“Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.”

God challenged Ahaz to create a test to show whether or not God could or would truly deliver him and his people. But Ahaz would have none of it. He replied:

Isaiah 7:12 NIV

But Ahaz said, “I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test.”

In no way was Ahaz going to open that door! If he *did* put the LORD to the test and the LORD came through, then Ahaz would have to put his trust in God, instead of relying upon his own resources to solve the problem. Ahaz wanted nothing to do with a genuine relationship with God!

The Sign:

This is where the story becomes really interesting, because God declares that He is going to give Ahaz a sign *whether he wants one or not!*

Isaiah 7:14 NIV

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”

The name “Immanuel” means “God with us.” The child that God would cause to be born would bring His presence in a new and powerful way, regardless of the fact that King Ahaz wanted nothing to do with Him. A few chapters later in Isaiah we read these words about the child that God would cause to be born:

Isaiah 9:6-7 NIV

*For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.*

And he will be called

*Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

*⁷Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.*

*He will reign on David’s throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.*

A Second Test:

Fast-forward some 700 years and we find that the Jews once again at the mercy of an evil king: Herod the Great. Herod, only half-Jewish by birth, nonetheless nurtured the ambition of becoming the long-awaited King of the Jews. To that end he fought his adopted people's battles, built luxurious palaces and cities, and even rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem – on a scale such as the world had never seen.

Herod was not a devout Jew by any means. He built numerous pagan temples in various parts of his land. But Herod's decision to rebuild the Jewish Temple makes perfect sense when we understand that one of the greatest functions of the King of the Jews would be to restore the Presence of God among His people. What better way to welcome God home than to remodel His House and turn it into one of the wonders of the ancient world?

What he *didn't* bargain on was that God would actually *show up!* Remember how God gave a sign of His Presence to wicked King Ahaz? Well, God did the same thing to Herod in the form of wise men from the east appearing before him with a question:

Matthew 2:1-2 NIV

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

The mysterious star was a *sign* that a king had been born in Judea: The King of the Jews. If this were true, then it would seem that Herod's greatest task had been accomplished: God had come home to His people in the person of a new-born king. Israel's spiritual exile would be over. If Herod were sincere about rebuilding God's Temple in Jerusalem, then he would be the first to join the Magi in worshipping the King.

For Matthew, the ancient sign of a child born of a virgin and given the name "Immanuel" has come to its fullest meaning. But now it is Herod, not Ahaz, who is confronted with the sign that points to Immanuel:

Matthew 1:22-23 NIV

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

We all know how Herod responded to the sign that God gave to him. He pretended to wish to join the Magi in worshipping the new-born King of the Jews. But his real motive was to have the Magi find the child so that he could have the child killed. For Herod there would be but one "King of the Jews," and that king would be himself. He had no desire to see Immanuel.

Immanuel

A Sign?

In a sense, you can sum up Matthew's Christmas Story with one word: Immanuel. His story tells us that the baby born to Mary is the Great God of Heaven come into our world. Of course, nothing about the story looks like the arrival of God in His world. But isn't that how a useful sign works? Signs point us to something that we can't see yet.

Matthew's Christmas Story is meant to be a signpost for you in your journey. You may be going through a time and place where God seems very far away. You may feel like you lost your way, or you may feel like God checked out on you. Matthew reminds us that regardless of what our journey looks like or feels like, God has planted a signpost right in the middle of the path that reads: "Immanuel: God with us." The baby born in Bethlehem is the *Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*.

A Response:

The sign that King Herod found so threatening had the opposite effect on the Magi. Matthew tells us:

Matthew 2:9-10 NIV

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

When they saw it reappear, they knew that their long quest was over: they had found the King. Matthew tells us that the baby in Bethlehem became their Immanuel:

Matthew 2:11 NIV

On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

The first people to worship Immanuel are these strangers from another land.

God with Us:

On August 14, 1945 President Harry Truman announced the end of a war that had been raging half a world away. In a way, his words were a sign – to be doubted or believed. They were good enough for a sailor in Times Square.

The great God of Heaven hung a new light in the sky and announced the end of a far longer and horrible war when He said:

“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

Are they good enough for you?