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ISAIAH'S CHRISTMAS MESSAGE

By Rev. Wm. C. Robinson, D.D.
Decatur, Ga.

The presence of God is the most precious blessing of the Christian faith. God with us is the pearl of great price, the hidden treasure, the Gospel nugget. And this blessed thought is the way God reveals Himself in His Word. Philosophers talk of an abstract deity, a god afar off. Plato thought of God as so exalted above time, space, and matter that He could have no commerce with the things of this life. But our Lord Jesus Christ said, My Father worketh hitherto and I work.

God was with man as He made Him, walking with him in the Garden of happy fellowship. In the New Jerusalem the tabernacle of God is with men and He shall dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself shall be with them, and be their God, and He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes. But blessed be the God of all grace, He was with us in all the dreary waste of rebellion and sin and wickedness which lies between the fall in Eden and the consummation in Glory. In the wonder of His love He did not merely drive rebellious man out of the Garden of His presence; in the mystery of redemption He came and wrought a way to bring us back to Himself. On every page of the Good Book, one finds the footprints of God our Saviour. This is the Book of Immanuel, the story of how God came to be with His people.

The Word Immanuel occurs in the seventh and eighth chapters of the Prophecy of Isaiah and is quoted in the first chapter of Matthew. Very soon after young Ahaz succeeded to the throne of Judah he was faced by a combined attack of Syria, Israel, and Philistia. The army of Judah was beaten and many were carried captive to Syria and to Samaria. The Prophet Isaiah was sent to offer King Ahaz a sign to assure him of God's purpose to deliver Judah. In his unbelief Ahaz refused to ask a sign from God but instead appealed to Tiglath-Pileser of Assyria. In his refusal Ahaz doubted the whole promise of God to David. He put in jeopardy the Davidic line and so has been called the Judas of the Old Testament. But God Himself gave a sign: a vision of that Immanuel for whose sake Jerusalem and the house of David are preserved. Despite Ahaz's unfaithfulness, God will not break off His promise to David nor be faithless to the oath He swore to the psalmist of Zion.

God is with Jerusalem and the house of David. He protects them against the confederacy of Ephraim and Syria. And when the Assyrian comes down like a wolf on the fold, his cohorts all gleaming with silver and gold—Immanuel is Judah's protection. The power of the Assyrian flows over Damascus, Samaria, the valleys of Israel, and the coasts of Philistia. The lands of Judah are a prey to him, his spoils constantly increase. But when the floodtide of His might reaches up to the neck, to the heights of Jerusalem, he is stopped for IMMANUEL: GOD IS WITH US. Jerusalem was saved because in her bosom was the promise of the coming of God to save His people from their sins.

The Old Testament promises that God in His grace will come and save His people (Isaiah 35:3; 43:3,11; Hosea 13.4), and it also promises a

Messiah-Saviour from the seed of Abraham and the house of David (Gen. 12:3; II Sam. 7:16; Isaiah 11:1-10). The divine and the human lines converge in the promise: "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder; and His name shall be Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6). "A virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call His Name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14).

And the New Testament takes up where the Old Testament ends: Behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, for unto you is born — the city of David, a Saviour—and not merely a Saviour and a Saviour on earth—Emmanuel, God with us, God among us, God for us — but a Saviour slain.

"At last earth's hope was granted,
And God was a child of earth;
And a thousand angels chanted
The lowly midnight birth."

The New Testament focuses the eyes of our faith upon God manifest in the flesh, the Man Christ Jesus, the Mediator between God and man. The Gospel is the Messiah Jesus, the Lord who took not the nature of angels, but the flesh and blood of the seed of David. Our salvation is accomplished by no general idea, no docetic myth, no merely human hero. Jesus Christ is neither the embodiment of a Platonic idea nor the deification of a mere man. He is God who became also man for us men and for our salvation. Man sinned and fell in Adam. Man struggled, suffered, hungered, tasted death to its bitterest dregs, rose from the dead, and conquered in Jesus Christ. We are not saved by a mere idea, but by One who became bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. We are not saved by general truths, but by specific events—by the advent of Christ, His death for our sins, and His resurrection for our justification. We are saved by what God did for us in our nature, by His human acts, and agony by His human flesh torn and His human blood shed, by His perfect human obedience and His precious human death in our nature which God the Word assumed. The tendrils of our faith cling not to mere principles, but to Him who loves us. So the Gospels portray for us the conception and birth, the youth and growth of Jesus of Nazareth. They present the Carpenter who made yokes and built barns. They recount the hunger and thirst, the weariness and weeping, the agony and suffering, the strong cryings and tears, the scourging and crucifying, the vinegar and the spear, the cry of forsakenness and the death of Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews. In Him God came all the way with us. He who was in the form of God took the form of a slave and humbled Himself becoming obedient even unto death and that the shameful, agonizing death of the cross. God in Christ came all the way. He reached down level with the mud sills of society. The ladder of salvation He stretched from heaven reaches so low that the last, the least, and the lowest can touch its rungs.

On the third day He arose again from the death and thereafter ascended to heaven. Does this mean the end of Immanuel, God with us? By no means. He ascended to the right hand of the Father that He might be with all His people all their days unto the consummation of the age. He went to the Father that He might send the Spirit and in the Comforter be our ever present Friend and Helper. Wherever two or three gather in His Name, there is God our Saviour. "Lo, I am with you always." The living Christ stops Saul the inquisitor on the Road to Damascus, and ere long a New Apostle arrives in Corinth determined to know nothing save Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Paul preached Jesus Christ not as a mere idea, not merely as the important doctrine of the Person of Christ. He preached Jesus Christ because He is living, acting Lord and Saviour. He is the truth embodied, alive. While Paul preached in Corinth the Person who did great things there was not the Apostle but Jesus Christ. And men's faith stood not in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. God was with men there in Corinth, God in Christ, and hence arose the Church of God. The great thing in the Church is not declaring what we do for Him, but testifying to what He does for us. God is with us in the Church today. Christ is the living Lord and Head and King of His Body. As the Good Shepherd He is speaking His own Word through the preaching of the Gospel and in the power of the Spirit. As the Priest He is praying for our forgiveness and for grace to lift us from the pit of sin. As King He is ruling over us and defending us, exercising His own authority by the ministry of men so long as these men speak and act by His Word and Spirit. In Christ God is with us speaking to us, interceding for us, strengthening, correcting and guiding us. There are no days too hard for Him, no forces too strong for His might, no bitternesses too sharp for the softening touch of His love. Immanuel who saved old Jerusalem is with us today!

But let us seek to be concrete. The writer has served for several years as Chaplain of the American Legion, and as such it has been his duty to write the Christmas Message for the last four years. In 1944 an anxious father wrote to breaking hearts. The ice and the snow, the mud and the slush, the tanks and the shrapnel, the cold and the pain made a hard Christmas over there. And the heartache and the anxiety made it a hard one for us here. But though it was a tearful one, Christ made it a prayerful one. And the hand of God lifted where the tears could not reach. We came to God in the new and living way that Christ opened for us. We came pleading no merit nor goodness of our own, but trusting solely in His merit, taking refuge under His heavenly intercession. In 1944 our Christmas prayer was:

Jesus lover of my soul
Let me to Thy bosom fly . . .
Cover my boy's defenceless head
With the shadow of Thy wing.

The promises of God were so many banners encouraging us to pray. One father stayed his heart and his home on these words: "Am I a God at hand and not a God afar off, saith the LORD. Can any hide himself in secret place so that I shall not see him? saith the LORD. Do not I fill heaven and earth? saith the LORD."

Christmas 1945 carried another blessing from Immanuel. Instead of the Battle of the Bulge there was the victory in Europe and the victory in Japan, peace and the return of so many loved ones. Verily,

God was with us, God has been very good to us. We recognized His presence with the great word THANKS. Thanks be unto Him who saved us from war's desolation! Thanks be to those who stood for their native land, and to those who gave most! Thanks be unto God for the unspeakable gift of His love, His only-begotten Son!

Christmas 1946 was a challenge to live worthily. Since God came into human life our lives can no longer be meaningless. Life is not just a jumble. Even its handicaps and its sufferings have purpose. Since supreme goodness was put to supreme suffering on Calvary and for the supremely worthwhile purpose of glorifying God and saving men, there is meaning and purpose for every man's life. Life cannot be mean or sordid or drab or commonplace when we hear the angel choirs singing at Bethlehem: GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST AND ON EARTH PEACE GOOD WILL TO MEN. When the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, not to get but to give, He etched life's purpose in letters of light.

Christmas 1947 has its serious note as gold-starred wives and parents weigh the question of whether to leave the bodies of their heroes there or return them here. Naturally that is a question no one can solve for another. But dear friend, the longing of your heart cannot be satisfied by anything a grateful nation can do in this matter. You need someone greater than Uncle Sam. The yearning of your heart will only be answered by your reunion with the living person of your dear one. And that is a consummation only God can bring to pass. Your heart ache will only end in the Resurrection. And Jesus said: "I am the resurrection and life. He that believeth on Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live." If we believe that Jesus died and rose again even so them also that sleep in Him will God bring with Him. Again Christmas is the answer to our need. God is with us and God is with those who sleep in Jesus. Their spirits have gone to be with their Lord, while their bodies being still united to Christ do rest in their graves until the Resurrection.

When Martin Niemoller preached in the Chapel at Princeton University he said: The text for the day is, Now is Christ risen from the dead and become the first fruits of them that slept. Hitler did not believe that and that is the reason why he is where he is today.

Over against the unbelief of a Hitler, there stands the confession of that Christian mother who faced her sorrow in faith of Immanuel:

Some day there shall come a
Resurrection morn!
And I shall see again and know my son.

The True Evangelism

"True evangelism, as distinguished from counterfeit evangelism, preaches only the Christ presented to us in the Bible . . . It preaches only the Christ who was conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the virgin Mary, only the Christ who said to the winds and the waves with the sovereign voice of the Maker and Ruler of all nature: 'Peace, be still,' only the Christ who died on the Cross as a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice and reconcile us to God, only the Christ who rose triumphantly from the tomb and showed to His doubting disciple the print of the nails."

—J. Gresham Machen.