

Mid-week Advent I  
Immanuel

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

God has never been a distant God, at least, not in the sense that He was never around.

In the beginning, on the Sixth Day, God created man from the dust of the earth. He breathed into the man's nostrils the breath of life. He walked with the man, talked with the man, watched the man name all the animals, and had compassion on the man when, among all the animals there wasn't a helper suited to him. Then, he caused the man to fall into a deep sleep, took a rib from his side, a fashioned it into that suitable helper. Adam saw his helper and exclaimed, "Woman! For she was taken out of man." Furthermore, it seems that it wasn't unusual for God to take regular strolls in the Garden of Eden, during which, on one particular occasion, Adam and the woman hid themselves from Him. (cf. Genesis 1:26-27, 31; 2:5-24; 3:8)

If there's anything to be said about a distance between God and man, it is on the part of man distancing himself from God, and doing so by way of sin. Adam and the woman hid themselves because they had been deceived by the devil and broken God's commandment, sending the rest of mankind on that downward spiral away from God and His goodness. So it is with you, participating in every evil and sin because of that deceived and fallen nature, the Old Adam in every one of you, questioning God and His goodness, doubting His providence, not believing His wrath. That's how the rest of history since the fall has played out, such that there were certainly times when God seemed distant or felt unapproachable.

For instance, there were the 430 years when His chosen people were slaves in Egypt. There was also a period of about 400 years after the last prophet, the time between the Old and New Testaments. However, although He seemingly "stepped aside" and allowed His people to remain captives, and although He was silent with respect to the prophets ceasing to appear (cf. 1 Maccabees 9:27), He was still present among His people. Yes, He allowed His people to be slaves for 400 years, but He appeared to Moses in a burning bush, then through Moses and Aaron, led His people out of Egypt, appearing before them as a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day. (cf. Exodus 3:1-6; 13:21) Furthermore, He gave them instructions to build a tabernacle with His mercy seat—the Ark of the Covenant—in the innermost part. (cf. Exodus 25ff) In that tent, and later the temple in Jerusalem, God dwelt among His people, even in the period between the testaments.

Now, it's probably difficult imagining how all of that looked and worked, how God appeared and walked since God is spirit. I suppose the pillar of fire by night may be easier to imagine than the pillar of cloud by day; still, I wonder what that might have looked like, sounded like, felt like, even smelled and tasted like. Then, to see that cloud descend into the tabernacle and know that God is there and to know that God was on His creation in a temple built by His creation in Jerusalem—it can be difficult to wrap one's brain around that concept. Nevertheless, God has always been with His people right from the beginning.

Then an angel appeared to a virgin in Nazareth and gave her a fantastic message:  
Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you! [B]ehold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end. (Luke 1:28, 31-33)

That same angel later appeared to her betrothed with more of the fantastic message: "[T]hat which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel' (which means, God with us)." (Matthew 1:20b-23)

Immanuel...God with us. As I said, God has always been with His people. But this time, it's different. God has always had a presence with His people, but He has to that point never been one of His people.

One of my favorite things to point out this time of year is what St. John wrote about "God-with-us." Those of you who know me well and have heard me speak of this often know where I am going with this. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us..." (John 1:14a) At the exodus, God dwelt among his people in a tent and later in a temple; I've spoken to this point already. When John wrote that the Word dwelt among us, the word He used there is the word used to refer to the material upon which scenes were painted for Greek tragedies. It's the same material from which tents were made. What you can understand John to have written is that the Word became flesh and pitched His tent among us—that He tabernacled among us. This is God-in-the-flesh replacing God-in-the-tent.

God once walked in the Garden of Eden with Adam and the woman, however that may have looked, but in the person of His Son, He walked among His people in the flesh. Jesus, the Son of God and Son of Mary, is the enfleshed God, who was conceived and born, grew and lived, died and rose, and is now ascended to the right hand of the throne of God. He was fully present in His own flesh and blood on earth, walking and talking and eating and drinking and learning and teaching, like an ordinary man, and healing and multiplying bread and fish and raising the dead like only God can do.

And there is something He did which only He could do. As fully man, Jesus was able to give His life over to death, and do so as the ransom for many. It's worth as that ransom is only because He is also fully God. And, as fully God, He was able to take His life back up again. He lived and died and rose, the perfect man and perfect sacrifice for all sin. That's what it means for Him to have been given the name Jesus: YHWH saves. And YHWH saves by being Immanuel: God with us—to live and die for all mankind, the once-for-all sacrifice for all sin...for your sin. And to rise again as victory over death, over the death sentence first pronounced to Adam and the woman after God "found" the hidden first man and woman. That's why God was with us in the flesh: to shed His blood for sin and rise from the dead to grant victory over death. All that other stuff—the healing and multiplying and raising the dead—they were all signs pointing to Him being the propitiation for sin and victory over death.

Having completed His mission, He ascended to heaven. Once again, it may feel as if God is distant. The Son of God has ascended to the throne which He never left, so, He no longer walks among us. He is bodily on His throne, not here or over there or anywhere else.

Still, He is Immanuel, God-with-us. Before He ascended, Jesus promised, "[W]here two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them," and, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 18:20; 28:19-20) You have his promise to be with you, even though you cannot see or hear him. As God has always been, in all three persons, He is present in His divine omnipresence.

Moreover, you have His promise to be with you in His means. And where He is with you in His means, He is there for you with His grace and mercy. Where the Word of God is read and proclaimed—as it has been and is being done here and in this moment—Jesus is there with His Holy Spirit to give you exactly what His Gospel promises. In Holy Baptism, you have received the gift of the Holy Spirit and the sign of the cross upon forehead and breast to mark you as one redeemed by Christ the crucified and the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was placed upon you. Whenever you desire, you can hear the words of Holy Absolution, of which you confess: "I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, in particular when they exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation and absolve those who repent of their sins and want to do better, this is just

as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.” In the Words of Holy Absolution, Christ your dear Lord is dealing with you Himself—He is God with you in that very moment.

And as if to top it all off, look on the altar, and there see what will be for you the very body and blood of Immanuel, given to you with bread and wine to eat and to drink. Though you cannot perceive Jesus in His means, not with the senses of the flesh, by faith you can touch and taste the goodness of the Lord as you receive His body and bread and blood as wine for your forgiveness, life, and salvation. You take into yourself Immanuel, and He is most certainly and tangibly in that moment God with you!

He is Immanuel, God-with-us, and He is with you in grace and mercy. Never doubt that He is present; even in those times when He feels distant, He is still with you. Don't trust your feelings, take Him at His Word: “I am with you **always**,” therefore, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.