

***Immanuel***©**John 1:1-5; 10-14****December 27, 2015****Dr. Sharlyn Gates**

I'm still reveling in the reflection from the Christmas Eve candlelight glow. I'm not sure the homily with the children and the gift box made much sense, but oh, how I loved having all those little ones around me, excited to see what was in that box. It was such a blessing to have Adelia and Cole here with us, as well as Gibby and Abby and Holden. What would Christmas Eve be without children?

Children have such a wonder in their faces. They are so excited. I watched the video of Gibson Dryer on Facebook as he ran into the living room and discovered the wonder of what Santa had brought. What joy there was in his face and his voice as he practically danced around the tree.

And there was Holden's picture in his Fireman's hat, such happiness. And there was Abby in her striped, elf pajamas, asleep in the car after the Christmas Eve service, one leg crossed over the other one, head slumped over, sound asleep.

And Fred and I had the joy of having our Michigan kids and grandkids with us yesterday, and still here with us today. There is something so special about having our loved ones with us, isn't there? Our family, those we love so much and are closest to. It is a comfort to have them with us. It is such a joy.

When I say those words ... *with us* ... I can't help but think about the name that Isaiah said Jesus would be called ... *Immanuel*.

What does Immanuel mean? God with us! I told Fred, as I was writing this sermon, that I've talked so much about this subject – about the Word becoming flesh and living among us. What is there to say that's new and different?

But maybe – just maybe we don't want new and different at Christmas time. I mean don't we usually try to carry on the traditions of our families from the past? Sure, we do make our own new traditions as well, but most of us have favorite memories of the rituals and foods that just say "Christmas" to us.

I have a book that is so special to me. In that book there is a story that was part of our Christmas Eve bedtime story when I was growing up. We always did the same things on Christmas Eve and we could not imagine doing it any different.

We would go to the Christmas Eve candlelight service where big homemade candles were glowing in the windows. They were made by my mom and I helped her, so they were very special to me.

Our service was much earlier than the one we have here. It was at 4:30 in the afternoon - just barely getting dark. But it was lovely and so meaningful.

After that service we all went to my grandmother's house. Nana was an amazing cook and we had a huge Christmas Eve supper at her home. Afterwards, we did the usual hamming it up, singing around the piano. Sometimes singing solos. Because that's what my family did.

Then, we went home and dad would put the big log in the fireplace that would keep burning all night. We hung our stockings on the mantel ... real stockings. My dad had like size 13 feet so the stockings were quite big. They were those big white work socks.

But the favorite part of all was being in our p.j.s sitting around mom while she read that little Christmas story – “Christmas at the Hollow Tree Inn.” It was written by Albert Biggelow Paine in the early 1900's. It's about these friends named Mr. Crow and Mr. Possum and Mr. Dog and how they played tricks on each other, and in the end they became very good friends and they had a wonderful, surprise Christmas together.

The language is more old English – there are some words we don't use today. But my mom could tell that story with so much emphasis and fun that it was like we had never heard it before – yet, we loved it because it was so dear to us.

So she would read it to us and then she would read the Christmas story from the Bible, and then we would sing *Silent Night* as we children went to our beds to be tucked in and to wait for Santa to come.

That tradition was the best – for us! After Fred and I moved back to Kansas from Tennessee, I couldn't wait to have our grandchildren over so I could read that story to them by light of candles and the Christmas tree.

But - it didn't go over so good. About half way through the story, four year old Natalie faked a yawn and said, “Is anybody getting sweepy?” She was bored to tears with my favorite tradition!

Thank goodness I have moved to Michigan, because Andrew and Izabel like for me to read that story, and all the others in the book!

As I was saying before I got into the business of reminiscing – to have our loved ones with us – that is truly the most comfort and joy, isn't it ... even if the old favorite stories are *not* the favorites of the younger generation? What is the most wonderful of all is to have them with us.

And what was it that we said *Immanuel* means? *God with us!* Think about it. God wanted to be with us so much that he came to us in the incarnation. He came to be

born as we are born. He came to feel what we feel, to experience what we experience. He came to be every bit as human as you and I are human.

It was a dangerous time to be born. Especially to be born a Jew. And poor. At that time the land was occupied by Rome, and Caesar Augustus was emperor. Herod the Great was appointed king over Judea. He was a non-Jew – ruthless, coldhearted murderer.

It is said that King Herod murdered his wife, his three sons, his mother-in-law, his brother-in-law, his uncle and numerous others. His power meant more than anyone's life to him.

Next week we will talk more about his ruthlessness as we hear about the wise men coming to Herod and asking for help in finding the King of the Jews. You already know that didn't go over too great with Herod the Great.

But, to be a Jew and to be poor in a land occupied by people who had fun watching people suffer was not always easy. Life could be very hard. Yet, God chose to "be with us" in that time, in that situation, under those difficult circumstances.

When I think about children, especially at this time of year, I can't help but wonder how Jesus was as a child. Jesus – God with us, who came as a tiny baby, born just like we are. I can't help but speculate on these things:

Was He afraid? Afraid of the dark? Afraid of storms? Of people?  
 Did He need to be comforted by his mother when he fell down? Did He need to be disciplined by His human father when He misbehaved? Did He, as a child, misbehave? Surely He did, if He was like us.

Isn't it wonderfully amazing that the God of the galaxies created us humans in His image – made us to be somehow like Him; yet, He came to be like us? Created Himself to be in our image?

But why? Why leave all the glory and power of heaven to come be with us? There are so many Christmas hymns that say it so well ...

God rest ye merry gentlemen, let nothing you dismay  
 Remember, Christ, our Savior was born on Christmas day  
 To save us all from Satan's power when we were gone astray

O tidings – (good news) – tidings of comfort and joy  
 Comfort and joy!

And from ***"It Came Upon the Midnight Clear"*** – I especially like the third verse that says:

And ye beneath life's crushing load, whose forms are bending low,  
 who toil along the climbing way with painful steps, and slow.  
 Look now! For glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing;  
 O rest beside the weary road, and hear the angels sing.

And then there is the hymn we are going to sing in just a moment:

In the Bleak Midwinter, frosty wind made moan, earth stood hard as iron,  
 water like a stone; snow had fallen, snow on snow.  
 In the bleak mid-winter, long ago.

Even today – although we may not have snow on snow in this winter, all you have to do is look at the news to feel the bleakness of it all. Times really haven't changed much since the day Jesus was born.

We still have wars, we still have people with such a desire for power that they will do anything to get and keep that power. We continue to have the poor struggling just to have food and shelter. We continue to have thousands upon thousands of refugees.

What an amazing comfort it is to know that God who created everything, who created us in His image and who loves us with a depth of love we cannot grasp, that same God saw our desperate need and came to be with us.

Yes, He grew up and He died and He left the earth. But it was a dying that sacrificed everything so we might come to know His love for us – His beloved children; so we might have forgiveness and life eternal with Him; so that there would be nothing – not even death – that could ever separate us from that amazing love.

And while He is no longer here as a human, He gave us a gift that is everlasting – the gift of Himself in the Holy Spirit so that we feel Him in our hearts; so that the words in the scriptures become illumined for us to understand; so that, while we cannot see Him, we know He is with us always; so that when we cry great tears of sorrow, we find comfort and peace, and when all seems to be falling apart, we find joy in Him.

Incarnation means that God became human and lived with us to show us His love, to show us grace, and to promise to never leave us. Just as we have comfort and joy with our families, we have the glad and awesome reality of knowing God with us even today. Thanks be to God – Immanuel – God is still with us. Amen.

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