

Sermon by the Rev. Bollin M. Millner, Jr.  
Grace and Holy Trinity Church  
Richmond, Virginia  
Advent IV  
December 18, 2016

## ***The Collect***

*Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.*

## ***Isaiah 7:10-16***

*Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? 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."*

## ***Matthew 1:18-25***

*Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:*

*"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"*

*which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.*

I have a friend who is a huge Bob Dylan fan...he's even written articles about him and had them published! He goes to see Bob Dylan whenever he can. Now he has a grammar school aged daughter, so he takes her as well. He is a Fan...as in fanatic.

When Dylan comes to Richmond, he is always there...and...he stands outside the bus...waiting for a glimpse of his hero. A lot of times, he doesn't see him, Dylan is already in the building or something else has intervened. Maybe he's on the phone talking to the Nobel committee.

But one time, right next door actually, my friend is outside the bus, Dylan's people come out to the folks gathered there on the street to say, "He will not talk to you, please keep your distance...he's coming out and walking straight into the theater. Its okay to take pictures." My friend had his daughter with him, so he had is daughter in the foreground and Dylan in the background. Special moment. And a treasured photograph.

Now to arrive at the special moment and get that photograph, my friend had to be very diligent. He had to show up whenever there was an opportunity. He had to keep with it and not get discouraged.

Speaking of photographs, I was thinking recently about a National Geographic photographer, Joel Sartore. I had done on of those DVD courses on photography with him as presenter. He tells about an assignment in Uganda.

He was there for several months, and he got a lot of really intimate shots...leopards at dusk, hippos at watering holes, hyenas lounging around a den at night. He shot 30,000 frames...in the end, National Geographic used 6 of them...of course, the six were awesome...and

National Geographic was very happy to hire him again. To get those six, Sartore had to make a great effort.

Today, the Fourth Sunday of Advent, has been called Immanuel Sunday, God with us, Sunday. Though certainly God always sustains the creation that was made through Word and Spirit, there are these times in the biblical story, where the presence of God, where the human experience of Immanuel, God with us, stand out...There are special moments.

But here's the thing, our experience and understanding of those moments depend on our attitudes of heart, mind and spirit....our diligence and discipline.

In the Old Testament Lesson, the prophet Isaiah is talking to King Ahaz. Ahaz is afraid because there are foreign armies threatening the City. Ahaz wants to make some entangling alliances that would betray the core values of the nation.

Isaiah tells him to trust in the Lord and says the Lord will give him a sign. Ahaz says, "I don't want a sign." Isaiah says, "Nevertheless, you will get one. A young woman will give birth to a child...the child's name...God with us... Not...damaging political alliances with us, but God with us. And by the time that child is old enough to know right from wrong, the armies you so fear will be gone.

So you see...Ahaz has the opportunity for an Immanuel moment, but he wants nothing to do with it. He is in his own head, wound up by his own anxiety and arrogance, and will figure it all out without the LORD's help, thank you very much.

Of course, we see the quintessential Immanuel moment in our gospel story. Another young woman gives birth to a child, and this child is a

sign that God is with us. We know, we can see, the whole story...we can see from cradle to cross to crown...and we know, each step of the way, in this person, in Immanuel, in Jesus, God is with us.

But we also know that what we see depends on our attitudes of heart, mind and spirit...our diligence and discipline. According to Matthew's telling of the story, there were some foreigners from the East who stepped out in faith to follow a star to come and worship. There was also, in Matthew's telling of the story, King Herod, who sees the Immanuel moment as a threat and seeks to kill the child.

Throughout the gospel story, people are given the opportunity to choose, for or against Jesus. To see him as "God with us", or to reject him as the enemy or as irrelevant. We have those same choices, to embrace Immanuel or not.

Let it be said, that as Christians, we have embraced him. But let us also remember that our embrace is ongoing, it is not relegated to the past.... God is STILL with us. The presence of God is not just in ancient stories, or on the day of our baptism, but day by day, in our very modern, 21<sup>st</sup> century lives.

What we see depends on our hearts, and minds, and spirits...our diligence and discipline. We have to stand outside the bus...we have to take 30,000 shots, so we can recognize the six really good ones. We have, as our collect for today has it, open ourselves to God's daily visitation.

It is daily prayer and Sunday worship,  
it is the practice of generosity,  
it is in service,  
it is through Bible study and in conversation with our sisters and brothers, that we build our ability to see and hear.

Let me end with one contemporary story of God with us. A true story of an older woman who became deathly ill. She lived alone and pressed the button on her medical alert pendant. She was taken by ambulance to the Emergency Room of a nearby hospital...and there she was in this somewhat cold and impersonal place, hooked up to all kinds of machines, watching her vital signs on the monitor overhead.

The thing is, she had medical training, so she knew what it all meant, she knew that she very well might die. There was, in the ER, a young man working, about 30 years of age, two and a half times younger than her, she reached out to him, and said, "I am not afraid to die. I just don't want to die alone." And the young man came to her, put his arms around her, and said, "I won't let that happen. I will stay with you."

She made it through the crisis, to tell me the story. The woman is a strong person, and has practiced over and over again, through the years, speaking the truth, being honest, knowing the power of relationship, and in that moment, she asked for what she needed and she received it because she asked. And if that wasn't Immanuel, I don't know what is.

I know you all live incredibly busy and difficult lives. You are raising children or tending to aging parents or maybe you are burning that candle at both ends. You are establishing a career or trying to find the right line of work. You are seeking balance, good relationships. You are fighting cancer, in yourself or in someone you love. You are struggling with the effects of aging or just praying for a baby to sleep a few more hours in the night.

And this is not to say that our lives are all a veil of tears, they certainly aren't. There is much joy to be found as well.

But in it all, my prayer is that you will find ways to stand outside the bus, that you will won't get discouraged but will take the thousands of photos necessary to get just the right one...

that you will open yourself to God's daily visitation...

that you will see and have that moment...where you know Immanuel, God with us. Amen.