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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
12/22/2013, Advent 4A  
Isaiah 7:10-16

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text this morning is from our First Lesson, from Isaiah 7:14. Let me read it again for you, this time in the King James Version:

Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:14, KJV)

## **ANN SIEMER**

Earlier this past week, I visited our member Ann Siemer at the Plattduetsche Home out on Long Island, to bring her the Holy Communion and the new calendar and a chocolate bar and to show her a videotape of last Sunday's Christmas Pageant. She looks great! Ninety-eight years old, and still beautiful in appearance and mind and spirit. She gave me my marching orders for this sermon. "Tell them to be proud of the name of our church!" Ann said. And that's what I mean to do.

What a lovely name it is, "Immanuel." It means "God with us." It is a name spoken with reverence and wonder by the angels above, I am quite sure. Those good-hearted beings never tire at discussing the matter. I seem to hear them bragging of our Lord: "What a great heart he has! Of all the planets in his vast creation, and of all the living creatures he has made, he has chosen to be incarnate as a human being — not as an angel, not as a cherubim or a seraphim, but as a human being on that wee planet over yonder. He chooses to stand at their side, forever! He is *for* them, not against them. He chooses to be their champion. Ahh, they are a blessed race, loved to the last beat of his mighty heart by their Maker and our Maker."

The name "Immanuel" was on the lips of the apostles as they raced around the Mediterranean world. It was their great message: God is with us!

The name "Immanuel" comforted the martyrs as they faced the sword and the saints as they lay on their deathbeds.

If God be for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31, KJV).

as Saint Paul so boldly sang

## LAST AUGUST

And the name “Immanuel” was with me this past August, when I was flat on my back in a hospital room, awaiting open-heart surgery. By God’s grace, I have survived! I have lived to see another day. Great day in the morning! It is good to be alive!

One hospital conversation especially remains strong in my memory. It was a conversation with a fellow patient. He was on the recovery-side of his heart surgery; I was facing mine in the morning. He knew that I am a pastor, and so he felt free to give me encouragement by way of that most lovely of methods — by saying that he would pray for me.

I was grateful for his prayers and I told him so. But there was something about the way he expressed his confidence — his confidence that all would go well for me — that caused me to linger some with him and to discuss prayer a bit more with him. You see, he was more confident than I was that I would survive the surgery.

Don’t get me wrong. I was indeed confident, but what I was confident *about* was something a bit different from the confidence of my friend. I was simply confident in Immanuel! I simply believed that I was in God’s hands and could rest there. He was confident that I would survive the surgery. These are not quite the same thing.

So, I tried to explain this to my new friend. I said that I was grateful for his prayers and I prayed too with all my heart that I would survive the surgery. As best I could, I was knocking on heaven’s doors, offering my opinion and urgent request to Almighty God, Maker of heaven and earth, that I come through the morning’s surgery okay. I have a family to take care and a ministry to continue. So, I wanted to live. *But*, I said, I felt it best to end my prayer as Jesus ended his prayer in Gethsemane:

<sup>39</sup>And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: *nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.*  
(Matthew 26:39, KJV)

Now, here is the earnest response of my friend: He answered, “But it would make no sense if you did not survive the surgery. You seem to me to be a good man. Why should you die? How can that make any sense?”

It was a chance to speak of the resurrection. And so I did. Please note that at this point in my life, this was no calm theological discussion for me. I was a sick man trying to explain my faith as I entered into surgery. So, I tried to explain to my friend that the content of my faith was not so much that I would make it through the surgery okay, but simply that I trusted God, whatever his will, for I

believed that he was with me. I believed that God is in truth “Immanuel.” Therefore I believed that if I should die in the morning, one day I would understand and give whole-hearted thanks to God for that path. Furthermore, I said that I would be *able* to do so — to see and understand and to give thanks — because I trusted Jesus to raise me up to life again. The resurrection of Jesus is what makes sensible the path that at first seems very hard, even dreadful.

I am not sure my friend followed this line of thinking. Perhaps you do not follow it either. I fear that I am not being very articulate about it. Perhaps Saint Paul expresses my point best of all:

If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. (Romans 14:8, RSV)

And the reason Saint Paul can say such a wonderful thing is because of the beautiful name by which our church is called, “Immanuel,” God with us.

## **THE SHEPHERD BOY DAVID**

“Immanuel” was the name with which David went out to fight that giant Goliath.

<sup>10</sup>And the Philistine said, I defy the armies of Israel this day; give me a man, that we may fight together. <sup>11</sup>When Saul and all Israel heard those words of the Philistine, they were dismayed, and greatly afraid. (1 Samuel 17:10-11, KJV)

<sup>32</sup>And David said to Saul, Let no man’s heart fail because of him; thy servant will go and fight with this Philistine. (1 Samuel 17:32)

<sup>37</sup>David said moreover, The LORD that delivered me out of the paw of the lion, and out of the paw of the bear, he will deliver me out of the hand of this Philistine. And Saul said unto David, Go, and *the LORD be with thee*. (1 Samuel 17:37, KJV)

And the Lord was with David, as King Saul had said. The Lord was Immanuel for David the shepherd boy.

## **ELISHA AND HIS SERVANT**

“Immanuel” was the name by which Elisha could comfort his frightened servant who stood dismayed at the array of enemy facing them:

<sup>16</sup>And he [Elisha] answered, Fear not: for they that be *with us* are more than they that be with them. <sup>17</sup>And Elisha prayed, and said, LORD, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see. And the LORD opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha. (2 Kings 6:16-17, KJV)

## **MARY, THE MOTHER OF OUR LORD**

“Immanuel” was the name by which Mary could consent to that most strange of blessings: that she should be mother of the Christ Child. It was the very first thing the angel Gabriel had to say to her:

And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, *the Lord is with thee*: blessed art thou among women. (Luke 1:28, KJV)

And if this be true, then Mary is content with this wondrous pregnancy, though she be a virgin. If God be “Immanuel” for her, then she is ready to surrender herself to the will of God:

And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:38, KJV)

## **LEON ALEXANDER ALVES**

And “Immanuel” is that blessed name by which we want little Leon Alexander Alves to live all his life long. Through his baptism this morning, we are entrusting that name to Leon. We are linking these two together: Leon and Jesus of Nazareth. And through this unity, Almighty God, Maker of heaven and earth, becomes Immanuel for Leon.

But here is an important point, taught to us by Martin Luther from long ago. Alas, even in Luther’s pious age, it was possible for parents to have their babies baptized, but then to fail in their promises to raise their children in the church. But that is no good, for as Luther points out, it is one thing *to be* baptized, but something else, something greater, to *use* your baptism. For little

Leon to use his baptism, or for any of us to use our baptism, we need to know that God is with us, that God is Immanuel for us. As Luther puts it in his *Large Catechism*,

To appreciate and *use Baptism aright*, we must draw strength and comfort from it when our sins or conscience oppress us, and we must retort, “But I am baptized! And if I am baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body.”

What we want for Leon now and is what we want for ourselves now too: that in face of fiery temptations and whatever fury or contempt this world can throw at us, we can answer, “But I am baptized, and therefore God is with me, and I mean to live in the comfort and the holiness of Immanuel.”

For if God is with us, things are going to work out okay. To Immanuel, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be the glory now and forever. Amen.