

## **Sermon Draft**

**Text: Isaiah 7:10–17**

**Sermon: “God Is Present”**

*“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel’ (which means, God with us)”* (Mt 1:23). God is present with us.

That’s an amazing claim, given the common experience among God’s people of his apparent absence. Most of us, at some point or another, have wondered whether God is really with us. We face great difficulties, and we wonder if God cares. We encounter things we can’t explain or understand, and we wonder if God really exists. We cry out to God on our knees but hear nothing in response other than our own sighs. We slog through life, never experiencing much of a spiritual high or low, and we begin to question if God is with us. With a few exceptions, the people of God have often experienced life in a way that makes them think God is absent.

We are not alone when we wonder. We are not the first to question God’s presence. It’s safe to say that very few have never questioned God’s presence. In fact, those who question God’s presence are only continuing a millennia-old theme of God’s people doubting his presence.

Before the fall into sin, God walked and talked with his human creatures. His presence was obvious. Adam and Eve did not doubt that he was there. They doubted his reliability, thanks to the serpent. But that's a different problem. His presence was obvious.

After the fall, however, God's people have often doubted his presence among them. The episode with the golden calf is a case in point. In Exodus 19, God told Moses to meet him on top of Mount Sinai so that he could give him his Law. Moses was gone for a while. The people got antsy. They began to question God's presence. By the time we get to Exodus 32, they've concluded that God does not exist. Or at least, that he is no longer with them. Never mind the ten plagues that God brought on Egypt to deliver them. Never mind the parting of the Red Sea by which God rescued them. Never mind the manna that God provided in the wilderness so that the people wouldn't starve. "What have you done for me lately?" the people asked. When God did not respond, they decided he was no longer there.

That's what happened in our reading today from Isaiah 7. King Ahaz doubted God was with him. He had a reason to doubt foreign armies were mounting around him. But God had promised to be with his people forever.

God had promised to protect and preserve them. But Ahaz and the people of God looked around at the present circumstances and were not convinced.

That's when Isaiah entered the scene. God sent Isaiah to give a message to Ahaz. His message was simple: God is with you, Ahaz. He promised he would be with you. Believe him. If you have doubts, simply ask him for a sign—anything you want—and he will show you that he is with you. Can you imagine that? An invitation from God to ask him for a sign? But Ahaz wouldn't do it. Why not? Because he had already lost his faith. He had already put his faith in a “golden calf”; this time it was an alliance with a foreign army.

That's when Isaiah spoke those words that Matthew would quote seven hundred years later. You don't trust God enough to ask for a sign? ***“The Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel”*** (v 14). God promises to be graciously present in his creation through Jesus.

Isaiah's response to Ahaz's lack of faith was to promise a peculiar sign of God's presence. He promised a child who would be born to a maiden. This is hardly the kind of sign that one would expect from the Almighty.

But this would be no ordinary child. He was to be called Immanuel, “*God with us.*” Moreover, God would be with his people to save them from their sins.

Immanuel appeared as Jesus. The child who was also the eternal Son of God. He is God’s sign. He is God’s proof. He is God’s guarantee that he is with us. That is what makes Christmas such a big deal. That’s why we’ve been getting ready to celebrate Christmas since the day after Thanksgiving. On December 25, we celebrate the fact that God is with us that he is with us to save us.

But God’s people of every age question that too. We have our own golden calf episodes. God doesn’t behave in ways that we think he should, and our faith slides. We don’t see God solving our problems or healing our diseases or fixing our families or answering our questions, and we are tempted to conclude that he is not with us. God’s presence in Christ is still often hidden from us.

That’s why God gives us another sign. That sign is Baptism. The Lutheran Confessions speak of Baptism (and the Lord’s Supper) as signs of God’s gracious disposition toward us.

The Augsburg Confession describes the sacraments as “signs and testimonies of God’s will toward us” that “awaken and confirm faith” in us (AC XIII 1–2). The Apology draws on the Early Church: “*It has been well said by Augustine that a Sacrament is a visible Word, because the rite is received by the eyes and is, as it were, a picture of the Word, illustrating the same thing as the Word*” (Ap XIII 5).

When we think of Baptism as a sign of God’s grace toward us, we begin to see the importance Baptism has for every day of our lives.

Louis IX, who ruled France in the thirteenth century, was once reportedly asked why he signed his name “Louis of Poissy” and not “Louis IX, King of France” (which would have been the traditional way for a king to sign letters and documents). He responded by pointing out that Poissy was the location of his Baptism. Then he is said to have explained, “I think more of the place where I was baptized than of Reims Cathedral where I was crowned. It is a greater thing to be a child of God than to be the ruler of a kingdom. This last I shall lose at death, but the other will be my passport to an everlasting glory.”

This saying was etched in stone in front of the baptismal font at the former St. Louis Catholic Church in Cleveland Heights, Ohio. It reflects the Christian conviction that Baptism is the most important day in the life of a follower of Jesus. It identifies a Christian as a child of God who will live eternally with Christ. This identity manifests itself daily—not only in the signing of one’s name, but also in the sacrificial and selfless life of service to others.

No question: the sign King Ahaz refused to ask, the virgin birth, was among the greatest signs given to mankind (Isaiah 7:14). But in our Baptism, God has given us the sign that everything the virgin-born Christ accomplished by his life, death, and resurrection is personally and eternally ours.

Baptism is not only a sign of God’s gracious will toward us. It is also a sign to the world. Baptism signals to outsiders what we are as Christians (AC XIII 1), but it is our baptismal living that makes them stop to notice. As Paul writes in Romans 6, our Baptism means newness of life. This life manifests itself in sacrificial service to others—both to fellow believers in the Church and to those in need outside the Church.

When the everyday lives of God's people are shaped by their Baptism into Christ, the watching world sees the hidden presence of God. God's presence in the world today is made known through his people as they love and serve one another.

It's exactly one week until Christmas, and we all have an awful lot yet to do to get ready for it. As you hurry through all that remaining business, remember that in Christ, God is present with us. Jesus is Immanuel, God with us. And just as important, he is God with you. You know that because of your Baptism. You were baptized into Christ.

Running, scurrying, hurrying on this errand and that, to this mall and that store, as you welcome guests and make your social rounds, remember your Baptism in the way you treat clerks and other shoppers, in the way you treat visiting loved ones who may be hard to love, in the way you think about the gifts you select for others. Remember your Baptism as a sign that the babe in the manger is not only the Savior of the world. He is also your Savior from your sin, and now he is your strength for faithful living in his name.

Amen