

Welcome, Immanuel!

✧ in broken-hearted righteousness (vv.18-20)

✧ in faith-born love (vv.20-25)

In the name of Jesus **Immanuel**, dear family of God:

So much of life is a study in contrasts. Consider daylight hours in Minnesota. Yesterday less than nine (8:46) , but on June 20th, 15½ hours of light! ¹ Scholars debate why we celebrate Christmas in December, but it reminds me of Isaiah's prophecy: *"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."* (Isaiah 9:2 NIV84)

Contrast people who heard about **Immanuel**. First it was a wicked King Ahaz in our First Reading today. Everything God commands not to do, he does – and leads God's people to be more immoral than ever! But when God wants to reassure Ahaz that his enemies will not defeat him, you can picture the evil king stomping his foot, *"No! I will not ask for a sign. I will not test the LORD."* God had about enough of Ahaz, and told him through Isaiah to stop testing the LORD's patience. And in overwhelming mercy God answers wickedness in grace: *"Therefore, the Lord himself will give a sign for all of you. Look! The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and name him Immanuel."* (Isaiah 7:10-14 EHV²) In contrast, our Advent shout with Joseph: **Welcome, Immanuel!**

✧ in broken-hearted righteousness (vv.18-20)

Joseph is shouting, but not with words. Nowhere in the Bible can I find a single word spoken by this carpenter from Nazareth. But his actions still shout his heart's desire today. First, you see his mix of emotions so high and low to break your heart. He chose the young virgin Mary for his wife, then finds out she's pregnant. Where could his broken heart go from there? Would Joseph ask, "How could I be so wrong about her?" Would anyone blame him for asking, "How can I break up with her?" Men and women can feel the ancient Jewish proverb: *"What a man desires is unfailing love...."* (Proverbs 19:22 NIV84) You just want someone who will be loyal, to stick with you through thick and thin, to be your friend and companion, your soul mate. But none of that can happen if infidelity invades your relationship.

These matters of the heart are so tender. But in the perfect, divinely written law of Moses, the LORD God assigned the death penalty to adultery. So many sins that our society tolerates and encourages are hateful to the holy and righteous Judge. God still warns that *"the wages of sin is death"* (Romans 6:23), that *"without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness."* (Hebrews 9:22) And yet, Joseph had already decided not to report Mary to the authorities. He knew that God took his sin seriously too. With his ancestor King David, Joseph could take his broken heart to the throne of grace and pray, *"A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."* (Psalm 51:17 NIV84) In order to spare Mary, Joseph had decided to *"divorce her privately"* because as *"a righteous man, [he] did not want to disgrace her."*

"But as he was considering these things, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."

Contrast: One piece of information can mean the difference between triumph or tragedy. What's hiding the truth? Isaiah says, *"Indeed, you are a God who hides himself...God of Israel, the Savior."* (45:15 EHV) *"Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD."* (Psalm 27:14 NIV84)

¹ <https://www.timeanddate.com/sun/usa/minneapolis/>

² EHV ~ *Evangelical Heritage Version* (<http://wartburgproject.org>) © 2019. NPH: 800-662-6022; also Amazon-Kindle.

We do not know if this was Gabriel who appeared to Joseph. Matthew was inspired by God the Holy Spirit not to mention the angel's name. But an angel messenger announced the same miracle to stepfather Joseph as to the virgin Mary. No mistake – Mary's infant Son is the Son of God. Gifted with God's **righteousness** from above, Joseph also accepted his responsibility to support and protect Jesus as his own. **In broken-hearted righteousness** Joseph was ready and willing to **Welcome, Immanuel!**

All along Joseph had an option: Just leave. Leave behind a fiancée expecting someone else's baby. Who could blame him? Yet Joseph stayed. Joseph was a righteous man because he had received by faith the **righteousness** that comes from God in Christ. Even before he knew the truth about her baby, this **righteous man** would not disgrace his fiancée. Once the angel informed him about God's miracle in Mary's virgin womb, Joseph grew from compassionately kind to solidly dependable, courageous in the face of danger and death. Christ changes a repentant sinner into a courageous saint who lives and dies...

☆ in faith-born love (vv.20-25)

Did you notice Joseph did not ask any questions? Mary innocently asked Gabriel, ***“How will this be, since I am a virgin?”*** And Gabriel kindly told her of the Holy Spirit's power coming upon her conception. Zechariah must have asked in a doubting way how he and his aged wife Elizabeth would have John the Baptist in their old age. But the aged priest was disciplined by God through His angel, unable to speak until God's promise was fulfilled. Here **in faith-born love**, Joseph just kept listening.

God did not disappoint Joseph's **faith-born love**. His angel-messenger continued with instructions: ***“[Mary] will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,^a because he will save his people from their sins.”*** (^a21 *Jesus means the LORD saves.*) Fifteen centuries earlier God had saved His people from slavery in Egypt. After forty years in the desert with Moses, the LORD led His people into the promised land of Canaan by *Joshua* whose name means the same as *Jesus*, i.e., *Savior* or *Deliverer*. Picture yourself “between a rock and hard place,” or as the Chinese say, “between two jagged rocks.” You've got life's disappointments and troubles scraping you on one side, and on the other, the wrath of God for your sins waiting to grind you forever in that place of weeping and gnashing teeth. *Jesus* would come and burst a wide open way to God's heart through His own shed blood, poured out to pay for your sins and mine. But first, Jesus had to live in our place the holy life God demands. The more you know Him, the more you love Him. God inspires and enlivens **faith-born love**.

And yet to truly **Welcome, Immanuel!** along with Joseph we need to know the rest of the story as recorded by God's holy, inspired writer Matthew. None of this happened by accident. You and your life on earth and forever after are not an afterthought with God. ***“All this happened to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³“Look, the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son. And they will name him Immanuel,” which means, “God with us.”***

A rabbi and a Lutheran pastor walk into a bar.... Maybe, but this time they only talked on the phone. The Lutheran pastor did not know he was speaking to a rabbi. So when the caller asked how he could believe in the virgin birth, he quoted Isaiah 7:14, the same words as Matthew above. But the covert rabbi, retorted, “We don't accept the New Testament! עַלְמָה can mean *young woman*.” First of all, in the close context of Isaiah 7:14, why say, “Behold!” then try to make a miraculous “sign” out of a “young woman” (RSV; NIV2011 f.n.) getting pregnant? Wicked King Ahaz would yawn, “So what? Old women don't have babies!” But a “virgin” with child is indeed a miraculous “sign.” And **“the virgin”** was promised in the beginning when God said the Seed of the woman would crush the serpent's head. (Genesis 3:15) Mary and Joseph believed God's Word. As Gabriel told Mary, ***“Nothing is impossible with God.”*** (Luke 2:37) Jesus had to be the God-Man to save us from sin and guilt – forever loved by God.

With Joseph **in faith-born love** and **broken-hearted righteousness** over our own sin and God's forgiveness we **Welcome, Immanuel!** Joseph voluntarily helped ensure our confidence in all this. ***“When Joseph woke up from his sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him. He took Mary home as his wife, ²⁵but he was not intimate with her until she gave birth to her firstborn son. And he named him Jesus.”*** Dear God, thanks for Joseph. And welcome, O my Savior, now! Amen.