

**+ John 18:3-12 + Name of Wondrous Love—Immanuel<sup>1</sup> + Lenten Midweek #3 + 27 February 2013 +**

Can we even imagine a scene in heaven like this? The Father speaks to his beloved Son. “Son, the only way to free mankind from sin’s curse is for you to take on human flesh and put yourself in mankind’s place. You will have to become a speck of cells in a woman’s womb and be born a helpless child. You will become a human being so you can be the perfect substitute for all people, not only under the law, but also on the cross that all sinners deserve.” We don’t really know how the dialogue went back in eternity when God planned our salvation, but we do know the Son’s response. It was willing obedience to his Father’s plan and wondrous love for unlovable sinners, love far beyond our comprehension.

So when the right time came, Christ, who was God from all eternity, became true man. He didn’t give up being God, but clothed his deity with humanity. He became the God-man, one person, yet both divine and human. Behind that miracle was the divine plan of salvation. As God, Christ gave the laws. As man, he was subject to them. As the God-man, his perfect keeping of the law now counts for you and me. As God he could not die, while as man he was mortal. As the God-man he did die, and with his holy, precious blood he made sufficient payment for all our sins.

About 700 years before Bethlehem, God used his prophet Isaiah to put a name on this miracle. **“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”** (7:14) Months before Jesus’ birth, the angel repeated those same words to Joseph. Immanuel would be his name, a name that simply means “God with us,” a name filled with wondrous love.

Not many recognized that Jesus was “God with us,” because he set aside the use of his divine powers. He still had them, but only occasionally used them as he walked the road to Calvary. For example, that night outside the Garden of Gethsemane, we get a glimpse. I wonder what Malchus, the high priest’s servant, would tell us about Jesus? Feeling his ear sliced off by the rash swoop of Peter’s sword and then sealed back on by Jesus’ loving hand, Malchus must have wondered, “Who is this Jesus anyway?”

The soldiers who came forward with the rope to tie Jesus’ hands must have wondered too. They had come with lanterns to comb the shadows of the garden for a dangerous suspect only to have him walk forward to meet them. They had come ready to fight off his followers only to hear him tell them to put their weapons away. Even stranger was how they had been knocked suddenly and helplessly flat on their backs after the suspect had simply said, **“I am he.”** Picking themselves up, they must have stepped forward rather hesitantly to bind his hands. They arrested him, but had they really? None of them could honestly say they had overpowered him. In reality, it was as if he had let them arrest him, as if he willingly went with them. If they had been students of the Old Testament, they might have recalled the words of Isaiah (53:7), **“He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth”**. No, this was no ordinary man they were arresting. This was Immanuel, the God-man in wondrous love going silently, willingly to the slaughter.

What about the One who was arrested? What would he say? He could hardly say, “I didn’t know where it would all lead.” John tells us, **“Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, ‘Who is it you want?’”** The God-man knew what was coming. He knew about the cruel punches that would bruise his face, the sharp thorns that would rip his scalp, the sadistic whip that would chew up his back, the cruel nails that would puncture his flesh, and the fires of hell that would sear his soul. All this he knew, and yet willingly he let them tie his hands.

Nor could he say, “I couldn’t do anything else.” This was the almighty Lord, before whom God’s mighty man Samson looked like a 90-pound weakling. This was the almighty Lord, who with one snap of his fingers could have had 72,000 angels there to surround him, and who with three words had already knocked his would-be captors on the ground.

We really don’t have to ask what Jesus would have said that night in the garden. He had already said it earlier. Earlier Jesus had declared, **“The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again.”** (John 10:17-18) Jesus would speak to us of willingness, of willing love for

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<sup>1</sup> The thoughts and language of this sermon were adapted from a 2013 Lenten sermon series by Rev. Em. Richard Lauersdorf and Northwestern Publishing House.

sinner that tied his hands tighter than any rope, of willing love for sinners that compelled him to carry out his Father's plan of salvation.

Do you want proof that Jesus is truly Immanuel—"God with us"? Even more so, do you want proof that he truly loves you? How can you doubt if you've been watching and listening as the God-man is arrested in the garden?

Immanuel is his name. We've seen proof of how this name fits. Now let's see what it means for us. Is there any promise for you and me in that name of wondrous love? Where should we start but with the promise of salvation that name contains? Your God is not far off in the heavens, glancing at you from time to time across the miles. He's here with you in your sins, not to cause them or to share in them, but to save you from them. You no longer have to fear his presence at your side, as if he's checking up on you and keeping tabs on how often you fall. Instead, he stands before you in his Word with those comforting words: **"Go in peace, your sins are forgiven."** He's there in his Holy Supper, giving you the very body and blood that he used to pay for your sins. Our Immanuel has promised never to leave us or forsake us, but to surround us with his forgiveness.

He's "God with us" in our troubles. He knows what they're like. He suffered many of them himself. Is it grief caused by the loss of a loved one? He knows, having wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus. Is it temptation that never seems to leave you alone? He knows, as one who faced Satan's relentless attacks from the beginning to the end of his earthly ministry. Is it loneliness brought on by unfaithful friends? He knows, having experienced the betrayal of Judas and the denial of Peter. Not only does he know but he can do something about your troubles as the God-man who can do anything.

He's "God with us" in our feeble attempts at serving him. When it's two steps forward and three steps backward on the path of sanctified living, he knows. When it's your old sinful nature once again getting the upper hand in daily battle with your new self, he knows. He's there to whisper in your ear, "Don't give up. Remember, I have already paid for your sins, and I remember your failings no more. Remember that I'm here to strengthen you through Word and Sacrament so you can walk more closely with me. Remember I am Immanuel—"God with you" now and always."

He will also be "God with us" when our last moment comes. None of us know when that time will come, but you do know who will be there at your side when it does. When the walk through the valley of the shadows faces you, what comfort to be able to say, **"I will fear no evil, for you are with me."** (Psalm 23:4) What comfort to know that he's well acquainted with the valley of death because he walked it before you. What comfort to know that though the shadows may threaten, they can't harm you because Immanuel paid for your sin and conquered your death! What comfort to know your walk will end in heaven at his side where you can say to him whose love brought you there, "Now I am always with you."

We can't leave the Garden of Gethsemane without one more look at our Immanuel. Listen to what he's telling us in his wondrous love. "Don't you see," he tells us, "I let them tie me that I might untie you." "Don't you see," he says, "with the crimson scissors of my blood I've cut through the cords of sin that bound you hand and foot for Satan's slavery and for hell's confinement." "Don't you see," he says, "you're free—free from sin, free from Satan, free from death, free to live for me on earth, and free to live with me in heaven."

Lord, help us never to lose sight of our Immanuel and of his wondrous love this Lenten season and every day of our lives. Amen.