

4th SUNDAY SON OF GOD

A pastor preparing to baptize a newborn infant was intrigued that the parents had adopted as its name, “Nosmo King.” When he asked how they came up with this name, the mother took credit. She had been on the lookout for an unusual name before the baby was born. As she passed a building, she noticed the word Nosmo printed on a door. It struck her fancy, so she decided she would adopt it as her child’s first name.

On the way to the hospital to deliver the child, the mother passed the same building. This time, she saw the word “King” printed on another door. She saw this was a sign, and so she and her husband named their baby boy and had him baptized as “Nosmo King Smith.”

A few days later, the mother rather sheepishly called the pastor. On their way home from after the baptism, the parents had passed the name-giving building again. This time both doors were visible at the same time, and the mother realized what she had read as “Nosmo King” was in fact the words “No Smoking.”

Who is the baby we will welcome next week? We have named him in the past weeks as Lord, Shepherd and Messiah. But 5,000 years before Jesus was born, the prophet Isaiah gave the true name for this child. In Isaiah 9:14, he announced to King Ahaz, “Look, the young virgin is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.” Immanuel literally means God with us. Who is this baby: The Son of God.

Isaiah spoke at a time when the people desperately needed reassurance. Assyria had defeated the northern half of Israel and was heading south to Jerusalem. King Ahaz was inspecting at the water supplies for his city – making sure that they would last if the city were under siege for an extended time. This is when Isaiah offers a sign: Immanuel: God with us.

God with us. Consider each part of this name.

God: Yahweh, Jehovah, Creator, the great I AM, Shepherd, Lord, Adonai, Elohim, the All-Mighty, El Shaddai, Alpha and Omega, the One who was and is and is to come again. All of these were names for the one God who claimed Israel as His own. Since the time of Abraham, this untouchable, unknowable but all-knowing God had been a part of the people's lives.

Second part: With. Some years ago, Bette Midler sang *From a Distance* in which the refrain is, "God is watching us, God is watching us, God is watching us – from a distance."

With is not about distance. With is right alongside. Not overhead; not separated; not out there somewhere. With means amid, alongside, in the company of. Someone who is with you can be touched because his is near.

Us: That's you and me. Immanuel does not mean God with Jews; God with just women or men; God with just the rich or the poor; God with just the healthy or sick; God with just the happy or depressed; and it especially does not mean God with just the ones who please Him.

God with us: All of us. Every person, every circumstance, every place in the world, every time in our life including when we are like prodigal sons who have turned our back on our fathers and left their homes. God with us: Immanuel.

And Isaiah's prophecy of Immanuel came true. Against all explanations, Assyria backed down before it reached Jerusalem, and the city continued under Ahaz' leadership. Shortly thereafter, every young Jewish maiden had the same dream: That she would be the one to give birth to a special son named Immanuel. It became their prayer to be an instrument of God's will.

Almost 500 years later, Gabriel gets the honors of announcing who the mother will be. God sends the angel to the town of Nazareth where a young woman is awaiting her marriage to a

December 18, 2011 – Fourth Sunday of Advent

carpenter named Joseph. The woman's name: Mary. Gabriel greets Mary as the favored one by announcing, "God is with you." Immanuel.

The angel goes on to tell Mary the news: She will bear a son and name him Jesus, he will be the called the Son of the Most High.

And Mary's first response: "Who, me?" The problem with dreams is they sometimes come true. Mary was like the other girls who dreamed of one day being mother to the Messiah. But the reality is, she isn't married to Joseph. She's not sure he's going to take kindly to being told his fiancée is pregnant.

Gabriel reassures her that this child will be conceived through the Holy Spirit, and ends in verse 35 by declaring, "He will be called Son of God." And Mary's response is, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Because Mary says "yes," God comes to earth in a new way: in the form of a human baby. As long as God stayed up there in heaven, God wasn't with us – at least, not physically. Being born in a manger on earth connected us physically in a way that was to symbolize our spiritual connection.

Because Immanuel is not limited to 2,000 years ago. When Jesus returned to heaven, he gave us the Holy Spirit to continue to guide and direct us today. God with us: God living in our hearts.

God promises to be with us, but there is one catch: We have to accept that promise. We have to believe God desires our very best, and works for it, and chooses to be with us. God created us; God walked upon this earth for a few years in the form of Jesus; and God continues to bring peace to our souls if we allow God with us.

December 18, 2011 – Fourth Sunday of Advent

Pastor Kurt Pasco told of a Christian counseling center near Dubuque that offers psychological and spiritual counseling. Every Christmas, the waiting room of this center is full of tense and distraught men and women. Their brows furrow in pain; their eyes reflect sadness. The people are discouraged, depressed and defeated.

“Holidays are hard,” one client told a stranger sitting next to him. In a nearby office, one therapist confided to a colleague, “How can I help people celebrate Christmas when my own heart aches?”

She rose, opened the door to the waiting room, and said, “Come in,” to the next client, forcing a smile on her face as she did so. Therapist and client then went to work behind the closed door on defusing the holiday season stresses.

While they were in there, a young woman with postpartum depression walked into the waiting room. She came to her appointment with her newborn baby, who gurgled and cooed as he snuggled in his blanket.

When the therapists and clients emerged from behind closed doors, they saw the baby. Their eyes lit up. Genuine smiles crossed their faces. They approached the young mother and child with a lightness of step and faces that revealed the awe that a baby inspires. They marveled at the tiny hands and feet and took turns holding the bundle of joy. The whole atmosphere of the waiting room changed from gloom to joy, from despair to hope, from tears to laughter.

No longer were they clients and therapists. They became a community, a community of love inspired by the simple presence of a child.

God gave us his Son Immanuel. It is right there in the name: God with us. God with us then, now and always.