

Text: Matthew 1:22-23; Luke 1:26-38

Title: “The Immanuel Factor ... God with us in our Assignments”

INTRODUCTION

ILLUSTRATION – One of my favorite Christmas stories involves a man who was going through a time of doubt in his life. On Christmas Eve, his family was getting ready to go to the evening church service when he said to his wife, "I just don't understand why Jesus had to come into the world as a little baby and I feel uncomfortable celebrating something I don't understand." So his family put on their coats and went to the church and he sat down by the warm fire to read a book.

After a little while he heard a noise at the window. He got up to look outside but did not see anyone. After a short time he heard the noise again. It sounded like a bang on the window. He got up and looked outside but again nothing could be seen. Then he looked around and saw a few birds in the yard. He watched and saw that they were cold and trying to fly inside through the big front window. He knew that he needed to do something to help the birds; otherwise they would die in the cold. He decided that he would open up the shed in the back and leave a light on and some seed out so they would find a warm safe place to stay. After he was ready, he tried to get the birds into the shed. He waved his arms at the birds but they just watched. He yelled and ran around the shed flapping his arms to get the birds to notice. Nothing worked

Then the thought came to him ... if only he could become a bird just long enough to go and tell the rest of the birds that he had prepared a safe place for them. And that they should not be afraid to follow him. Then it hit him like a bolt of lightning. That's the meaning of Christmas. His doubts dissolved. Jesus had to come into the world as a baby so that we would not fear him and could follow him to a safe place he has prepared for us.

We've been talking this Christmas season about “The Immanuel Factor ... God is Closer than You Think.” And we have seen that the Immanuel Factor appears first in the OT prophecy found in Isaiah 7:14.

Isaiah 7:14 (NIV) - Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

The sign of a virgin giving birth to a son and giving him the name Immanuel was to be a sign to the ancient King Ahaz who was having trouble trusting God during a time of crisis in his life. The prophecy was fulfilled in the days of Isaiah and Ahaz; but there was a dual fulfillment to the prophecy. For when Matthew wrote his account of the birth of Jesus he tell us that the Lord came to a carpenter/craftsman by the name of Joseph, not through a prophet, but through an angel. Joseph was betrothed, or engaged, to a young woman named Mary. When Joseph discovers Mary is pregnant, he knows he and Mary have not had sexual relations. What is he to do? The angel tells Joseph to not be afraid to take Mary as his wife. What is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. God is working in this situation. And Matthew goes back to the prophecy of Isaiah and reveals for us that there was another baby that the Holy Spirit had in mind ...

Matthew 1:22-23 (NIV) - All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.”

Now some time before Joseph was told all of this, God was already at work in the life of the young virgin that was spoken of in the prophecy of Isaiah, and in the announcement of the angel to Matthew. And just as the Gospel of Matthew tells how the Immanuel Factor was at work in Joseph's life, the Gospel of Luke tell us how the Immanuel Factor was at work in the life of the Mary. Turn to Luke 1:26-28.

Luke 1:26-28 (NIV) - In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

The two most crucial human instruments in the great miracle of the Incarnation were Joseph and Mary. They each had assignments that were overwhelming. How would they shoulder such a heavy load? The answer is that the Immanuel Factor was at work in their lives ... God with us in our assignments.

We've talked about how the Immanuel Factor works as God with us in our struggles, in our confusion, and, today, in our assignments.

From Mary's experience we learn something about ...

1. THE CHALLENGE OF OUR ASSIGNMENTS (Luke 1:29-35)

Now just the very fact that an angel appears to Mary is enough to startle her.

Luke 1:29-30 (NIV) - Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God.

The word for “greatly troubled” means to be agitated. When it says she “wondered” what kind of greeting this might be, she was talking to herself, literally. She's afraid.

Now think about what Mary has just heard. The angel has announced, “You are highly favored (lit. “graced”). The Lord is with you.” The angel repeats in v.30, “You have found favor (grace) with God.” Now that should have been comforting to her, not troubled her. But she's troubled and afraid. Why? Is it because Mary understands that the announcement will carry with it an assignment ... a great assignment.

Note: This would be a good time to remind you that the Immanuel Factor is not just to make us feel good. God is closer than we think ... and He came near in the Person of Jesus Christ to do a job. He was on a mission. He was about the task of redeeming a lost world. The Immanuel Factor is not just about making us feel good when we're alone and confused. The Immanuel Factor is to get God's job

done! And the angels came to announce to Mary and to Joseph that they would get to be part of this great assignment.

Now if Mary was startled by the appearance and the announcement of the angel, she would be even more overwhelmed when she began to understand the scope of the challenge and the assignment that God was putting before her.

Piece by piece the plan unfolds. And with each piece of the puzzle going into place, she's more overwhelmed.

Luke 1:31 (NIV) - You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.

Understand that Mary is probably a young teenager. She was engaged to Joseph but they had had not sexual relations. But now the angel says she is to give birth to a son and name him Jesus? Wait a minute! Jesus ... the Lord is salvation ... hmmm.

The angel continues with the announcement and when he is through, there will be no doubt left in Mary's mind that God is up to something huge here:

Luke 1:32-33 (NIV) - He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

Unbelievable! Mary comes to understand that she will carry the child of God ... the son of God (a carbon copy of His father) ... the long-awaited Messiah ... the answer to the heart-cry of Israel:

"O come, O come Immanuel, and ransomed captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here."

And with each unfolding piece of the plan Mary feels more and more inadequate. Remember she's just a teenager who is being asked to shoulder an enormous assignment. Women were not upwardly mobile in those days. She was probably unschooled. She must have asked "Can somebody like me do this?"

Application: Ever asked that question? God has called you to an assignment in ministry ... a new job ... a new baby ... a new school ... "Can somebody like me do this?"

Answer: Yes, but only with the help of the Immanuel Factor

When you begin to consider the great challenge of your assignment, you may find yourself asking the same question as Mary...

Luke 1:34 (NIV) – "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

Note: I'm impressed that Mary's perplexity in this is not rooted in God-doubt, but in self-doubt. How "will" this be? She knows God can do it. But how can this happen since "*I am a virgin*"?

Now God has us just where He wants us when we face the challenge of our assignments, and know that we cannot do it without help. For you see, Mary's experience shows us something about the challenge of our assignments. But it also shows us something about ...

2. THE SOURCE OF OUR STRENGTH

Mary's question "How?" is a very practical one. She knows from a human perspective, she has not had sexual relations with Joseph, or any other man. But to have the child of God? And on top of all of that, this Child is to be the Savior of the world. How?

Luke 1:35 (NIV) - The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.

Note: Understand that this was not the crude, paganistic mating of a pagan god with a mortal woman to produce semi-divine offspring. That kind of stuff happened in pagan religious myths.

No, this is the Holy Spirit of Almighty God overshadowing her ... a conception produced miraculously by the activity of God.

And that is the source of our strength to shoulder any assignment, allowing us to rise to the occasion. You see God is in the business of taking unlikely people and unlikely situations, and doing amazing things. God likes to do the extraordinary through ordinary instruments. Another example is given to Mary.

Luke 1:36 (NIV) - Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month.

Luke 1:37 (NIV) - For nothing is impossible with God."

With man that is not the case. There are plenty of things that are impossible with man. But with God, all things are possible. God's power is the source of our strength for the assignments that are placed on us.

You see, God's presence comes with His power.

Now there's something else that we learn from Mary's experience how to tackle the tough assignments of life.

3. THE QUESTION OF OUR AVAILABILITY

God wants to do extraordinary things through ordinary people who are overshadowed by His power and His presence.

Question: Are you involved in anything that is so over your head that you know you can't do it without God's power? I know that many people live their entire lives carefully controlling things so they will never be put into a situation where they are in over their heads. If that is the way you live your life, you will never grow spiritually beyond where you are right now. Why? Because growth doesn't just come from sitting and reading your Bible ... it comes by accepting the challenges, the assignments that God has for you. And then you discover the excitement that Peter must have felt when Jesus invited him out of the boat to walk on the water ... to live for just an instance totally sustained by God.

Now I don't understand exactly how all this works out; I just know that it is true that in all these matters, the challenge that God gives us to us is also a choice.

God's challenge becomes our choice. Will I say "yes" to God's call? Will I yield to His assignment? Will I release my anxiety and fear over my own inadequacy and say as Mary said...

Luke 1:38 (NIV) - "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

God's challenge is also our choice ... but also His commitment. He never calls us to an assignment that He doesn't also commit His resources to help us fulfill our assignment.

As it was with Joseph, God's purposes and God's plans will go forward. The question is, will He be able to use me, or will I miss God's Plan A for me life.

CONCLUSION

SONG – Breath of Heaven