



**Dr. James C. Howell**  
**Isaiah 7:10-16, Matthew 1:18-25**  
**December 19, 2010**

I have a preacher friend who put it more eloquently than I ever could. She said "His name is Emanuel, the God who is with us who is made out of the same stuff we are and who is made out of the same stuff that God is and who will never let either of us go." I like that. Jesus is Emanuel, God with us. He's made of the same stuff that God is and the same stuff that we are and He will never let either of us go. This joining, this closeness, the never being let go, I think that's what we want to consider today and actually every day of our lives. We can detect it in the hand of Matthew, the gospel writer. We can't really interview Matthew but yet we can sense in what he says about Jesus that he is not being objective when he narrates the birth. We do this, don't we? We hear about a birth and we say "Oh, it came on Thursday morning at 10:30 and the child weighed 7 pounds 8 ounces and was 20 inches long. Or maybe we have a humorous story. One of my children – I was about to say "came out" – they did come out, yes – and the OB/GYN, who is a member of this church, holds this child up in front of me and said, "Dad, what is it, a boy or a girl?" And in the heat of the moment I couldn't think of what to say except "You're an MD, can't you tell?"

Matthew is not telling a funny story, and he's not just giving you the facts. He is someone who loves the Lord Jesus and he's writing to people who either love the Lord Jesus or whom he is hoping will love the Lord Jesus. He is all about the eternal significance of this particular child, Emanuel, God with us, this one who is made of the same stuff that God is and the same stuff that we are, and he will never let either of us go. Matthew would write his Old Testament. He knew the prophet Isaiah. We sang it in the carol "Lo! How a Rose E'er Blooming." Isaiah foretold it. Isaiah was really the first to get a glimpse of this Emanuel business. Isaiah was a wealthy person. He was urbane. He was educated. He had access to the corridors of power. He came to King A'haz who was a waffler who only pretended to be religious and Isaiah said, "Don't count on your armies and don't count on your political strategies and don't count on the gold that you have in the bank. Instead look (this is God's craziness), look to a child. His name will be Emanuel, God with us, made of the same stuff God is and the same stuff we are and will never let either of us go."

I want to think about the possibility that children can be unwanted or unexpected, yet this does not mean they are unloved or unneeded. In a way, Jesus wasn't wanted by Mary and Joseph. He wasn't expected but once he came, he was loved and he was certainly needed.

There's a great novel about Christmas written by Oscar Hijuelos. It's called "Mr. Ives' Christmas." Mr. Ives begins by saying that Jesus surely must be the most wanted child in the history of the world. The reason that he says this is because of what transpired in his life on two different Christmas Eves. In his own life, he captures the bittersweetness of the season of Christmas. One year on Christmas Eve, he meets the woman who will become his wife and then many years later their son, 17 years old, died on Christmas Eve. And because of the circumstances of the story, what Mr. Ives needs is some forgiveness. It's a whole book about forgiveness and at the end of the day, I believe that Christmas is about forgiveness.

I met the other day with my friend Leighton Ford. I told him about this revival that we're planning to do next month. I told him, I said "Your brother-in-law, Billy Graham, had a huge advantage over me trying to do this in the year 2011." The reason is when Billy Graham started preaching, the people who came in front of him felt guilty. They felt that they had sinned against God and they were looking for some word of forgiveness. I said, "Today people don't come in seeking, desperate for forgiveness." He said, "I beg to differ." He said, "Every person you speak to very much needs forgiveness or they need to forgive." There's been some misstep, some terrible mistake, something we wish we could take back or do over, and we need forgiveness. We need to forgive. Over these coming days you'll probably see somebody that you might need to forgive. Don't we need mercy in general? We've lived in this world where we have to achieve and we have to do so much to make it all happen and it's all up to us. Don't you crave above all else just some tender mercy? I think that's what the birth of Jesus really is about, this enactment, this embodiment, this great gift of God's mercy. It is a season of forgiveness.

I think about Mary, the mother of our Lord. We say it in the Apostles' Creed every week "I believe in Jesus Christ born of the Virgin Mary." I don't know what you think about that. Somebody came to my office actually seven years ago – you might have heard this before – my first year here I was doing a sermon series on the Apostles' Creed and this person knew that I was coming up on the sermon on the Virgin Mary, so he came by my office and he said "Tell me what you believe about the virginity of Mary. So I told him and then he leaned in and he said, "I know that's what you're supposed to say. What do you really believe?" I like that question. I told him what I really believed and it surprised him. What's interesting to me about things like what we believe in the Apostles' Creed, there are people in the world who believe all that stuff in the Apostles' Creed, and they are mean people. It doesn't seem to do them any good. Then there are other people, they just don't buy some part of it. That doesn't invalidate them as human beings. It doesn't keep us – does it? – if we have some questions about God that doesn't keep us from loving God. It doesn't keep us from following God. It doesn't keep us from seeking after God.

When I think about Mary as Virgin, the reason I believe this is, I really get so weary of living in a world where we always can measure cause and effect. We know exactly why everything happens. It's all physical. It's all up to us. Everything that happens happens because of something that we do down here. I find myself longing for some kind of interruption in that, for some kind of holy gift, for some kind of mystery, for some kind of act of God's spirit beyond what we actually do ourselves. I find myself thinking about the 50 people that I've known in my life that I've loved and admired the most, people I've known or people that I've studied from history. In fact, almost all of them, if you ask them, would say "I believe Mary was a virgin." I think they count for something. I think there's also this, I think in our tawdry, decadent world where sex is kind of so debased and recreational, I find myself longing and hoping for at least the possibility that there might somewhere be some holiness and some purity. Mary.

What's striking to me beyond that is that what Matthew says is that she was betrothed to Joseph, but before they came together she was found to be with child. I can't get over that. She was found to be with child. Here's Mary. She's young. She's probably illiterate. She's got to have calluses on her hands because she and her family would have had to work very hard every

day just to survive. She has a lovely future in front of her, and it is all put to risk because of the visitation of some angel and it says that she was "found to be with child." That means that something was going on, that God was doing something to her and she was not even aware of it. And I at least want to lift up that holy possibility to you. Might it be the case that God is moving in you and in your life and you're not even aware of it? You thought you were going shopping or going to work or doing whatever it is that you're doing, but actually, God's spirit is moving in a way that you cannot even begin to understand it but one day it will dawn on you and you will be so grateful. Maybe we learn now how to become attentive to what God is invisibly doing and we are found to be those on whom God is active and we'll discover Emanuel, God with us, the stuff God is made of and the ones made of the stuff that we are made of, and he won't let either of us ever go.

You may say to me, "I'll never be like Mary. God will never ask me to do something hugely important." And you may say "I'll certainly never be like Jesus and I'll probably never even be like Mr. Ives who manages to forgive when it was really really hard to forgive." I think for those of us like that, there is hope because we always have the character of Joseph in the story.

When I think about Joseph, imagine the emotions that Joseph felt, confusion, rage, sadness, grief. He felt it all but then the way we experience Joseph is he's in every Christmas pageant, he's on every Christmas card, but he's always just standing in the background. His job seems to be to hold the reins of the donkey. He never ever gets a speaking part in any of the pageants. It seems to fall to Joseph simply to be near Jesus. That's all that he does. But maybe that is enough. He's near Jesus. He's near this one who is made of the stuff that God is made of and the stuff that we are made of and he will never let us go. He is God with us. Joseph was with him.

I don't know anything about what I'm about to say to you but I believe that it's right. We don't know when Joseph died but he seems to have died before Jesus walks out as an adult into the world, so we assume that Joseph died while Jesus was still growing up perhaps during his teenage years. It would certainly be the case that when Joseph died that Jesus would have been there. Of course, he was there. He is Emanuel, God with us. He was with Joseph when Joseph died.

We think about grief and loss during this season. Everybody says "Tis the season to be jolly" but every one of us somewhere in our heart we have some sorrow, something that's unresolved, some dark shadow or perhaps a fear, but whatever it is, God is with us. He's made of the same stuff that God is and the same stuff that we are and he will not let either of us go.

The name Jesus, in closing, we kind of forget about this. We just think "O Jesus." We forget that Jesus originally was a Hebrew word, Yeshua, and you may have read somewhere in a Bible study that Yeshua means "The Lord saves." Before it means "The Lord saves" it means something else. It means "Lord, help, lord help." Actually most boys, the largest percentage of boys in the ancient world, were named Yeshua, Lord help, Lord help. We believe the reason for this is mothers in the agony of childbirth, fearing for their very lives, would cry out "Yeshua," Lord help. Then if they survived it, they would name the child Yeshua, the Lord helped. Every

time we cry out to God in need, we are very close to Jesus. Every time we love, every time we forgive, every time we are good or at least try to be, every time we hope, we are very near Jesus. To me, the season of Advent isn't some big celebration. To me, it's a prayer. It's a prayer that our lives will come to be about those things, love, mercy, forgiveness, goodness, hope.

So, I would like us together to say a prayer, rather to sing a carol. As I sing it, if you know it, I would invite you to join with me. Let's all of us make this our prayer.

*"Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask thee to stay close by me forever and love me I pray. Bless all the dear children in thy tender care and fit us for heaven to live with thee there."*

Amen.