**IMMANUEL—GOD WITH US**

Matthew 1:20-23

***“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” which means “God with us”.*** (v. 23)

Merry Christmas! There was a musical named “Jesus Christ Superstar” that became a world-wide sensation in the 1970s. It has been re-produced several times and is still drawing large audiences. Throughout AD history, not only Christians but also numerous non-Christians have acknowledged that Jesus Christ has influenced the world most. But is the title of “superstar” strong enough? C.S. Lewis said, “A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse…. Let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.” One of the nicknames of Christ in the prophecy of Isaiah 9:6 is “Wonderful”—which means “a miraculous or awesomely mysterious man.” Indeed, the life of Jesus Christ —his birth, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension--was full of wonders. Not only what he said but also his life itself was far beyond that of any human teachers. Jesus Christ is indeed the Son of God and God himself.

Jesus’ virgin birth by the power of the Holy Spirit points to all the miraculous wonders that followed in his life. In particular, Matthew testifies to the meaning of Jesus’ birth in two words--Immanu-El, which means “God with us.”Today,I’d like to think with you about Immanuel in three aspects. How did Jesus’ birth reveal God’s long persevering love for mankind? How has God been with his people? And what assurance and hope does Immanuel give to us? May the Holy Spirit open our hearts to be filled with the grace of Immanuel.

**First, God’s long persevering love for world redemption**.

Matthew’s Christmas account centers around the angel’s message to Joseph, the fiancé of Mary the mother of Jesus; ***“Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”*** (20b-21)

This message carries God’s long persevering love for world redemption. It started in the Garden of Eden when God called Adam, *“Where are you?”* after Adam and Eve broke God’s creation order by disobeying his command (Ge 3:9). The aftermath of their sin was tragic. The human race lost paradise and eternal life. But God gave them a hope of redemption in his curse to the serpent, Satan; *“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel”* (Ge 3:15). This verse is called “The First Gospel (protoevangelium).” God promised a Savior who would be born of a woman (Ga 4:4). To bring forgiveness and restoration to mankind, he would bear their sin and suffer unto death. Through his resurrection, he would crush Satan’s power of death and free his people. By calling Abraham, God began to work to fulfill this promise. The rest of the Old Testament is about how God worked through Israel over the time span of 1,400 years to send the Savior as the son of David and the son of Abraham (Mt 1:1).

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Matthew stated in verses 22-23, “***All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’ which means ‘God with us’.”*** Through Jesus’ birth, Matthew saw the fulfillment of the prophecy spoken by Isaiah seven centuries earlier. At that time, Israel was divided into two kingdoms—the southern kingdom of Judah and the northern kingdom of Israel. The northern kingdom allied with Aram and attacked Jerusalem. Isaiah 7:2 says, *“…the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind.”* God sent the Prophet Isaiah to tell King Ahaz that God would protect Judah and the invading enemies would soon perish. To assure the fearful king and people, God was mindful of giving a sign. But King Ahaz refused to ask for a sign, because he had his own plan to ask for help from the Assyrians.

Then God said through Isaiah, *“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign:* ***The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel****”* (Isa 7:14). This was the revelation about how the promised Savior would be born of a woman, a virgin, and who he really is. His identity was revealed in Isaiah 9:6; *“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”* He is God’s appointed eternal King. He is God and he would come as a human child to be with his people. The rest of the book of Isaiah revealed how he would redeem his people through his suffering and death, and how God would restore all things through him.

The coming of Jesus the Messiah testifies to God’s long persevering love for world redemption. The human race has turned away from God the Creator in their own ways. But God has never stopped caring for them, providing them, or working to save them. His chosen people of Israel were unfaithful and broke his covenant again and again. But God was with them throughout the history of the Old Testament in order to keep his promises to send the Savior of the world. Praise be to God for his long persevering and unfailing love for world redemption!

**Second, God has been with his people who love him.**

Ever since the fall of Adam, there have been two flows of human history-the flow of the godless majority and the flow of the godly minority. Often times, the God-fearing people looked like a small flock of sheep among wolves. But no power of the world could and will ever stop the history of godly people, because God has been and will ever be with them. Hebrews 11 tells us how God was with his people throughout the Old Testament times. God gave them faith to understand that the universe was formed at his command. God gave them a living hope of the resurrection and an inheritance of the eternal kingdom of God to come. God manifested his sovereignty and almighty power in answer to their faith and prayers. By faith, God enabled them to conquer kingdoms, to administer justice, to gain what was promised; to shut the mouths of lions, and to quench the fury of the flames. God turned their weakness to strength so that they might face persecutions and endure sufferings. God dearly loved them and had planned redemption through the Savior Jesus Christ so that they would be made perfect with us--the saints in the New Testament times (Heb 11:40).

The angel’s message to Joseph also reveals how God has been with his people who love him. Joseph whose ancestry traced back to King David was a nameless country carpenter, and Mary was a country girl. They were poor. But they loved God to the point of serving his will at any cost. The Son of God incarnated in the womb of Mary and would be born and grow as their son. God dearly loved Joseph and Mary and eternally honored them as the parents of the Savior.

God’s history is a continuation of love stories between God and his people who love him. It is the history of Abel, Enoch, Noah, the Patriarchs, Moses, Joshua, Rahab, Ruth, the Judges, David, the Prophets, Daniel and his friends—all men and women of faith. It is the history of the seven thousand who did not bow down to Baal in the Prophet Elijah’s time (1Ki 19:18), and the remnant of Israel after her exile. It is the history of Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna, Mary and Joseph, John the Baptist, the apostles, church fathers, and the reformers. It is the history of the early Christians who lived in the catacombs, the martyrs, missionaries, Bible teachers--all men and women of faith who loved God and shared his broken heart for the lost. God was with each of them and has carried out his world redemption history through them. God will honor their lives of faith and love with eternal praise and glory.

I am most thankful to God for his calling to live a life of love along with his faithful people who love him and share his heart. I thank God for Pastor Paul and Mary Choi and all of you who have served God’s mission together. I remember Pastor Paul when he came to Dong-gyo UBF in Korea. He was a gifted art student with passion for whatever he did. And he used to drink with passion to the point of being almost unconscious. God did a wonderful work in him to receive the light and life of Jesus; then his thirst was quenched. Since then, he has served the Lord as a missionary, pouring out his life with all of his passion, until his body yielded to a heart failure. The Lord will honor his beautiful life of love for him with eternal praise and glory. May God fully restore his body so that he may serve his purpose to the end. Together with him, you have given your lives to keep the lamp of God burning for the campus souls in St. Louis. In the eyes of the world, UBF St. Louis look insignificant. In the eyes of God, however, you are the most precious people of God in his history. The Lord is and will be with you and he will surely fulfill his purpose through your lives. Moreover, he will honor each of you with eternal glory along with all his faithful people.

**Third, the manifestation of the grace of Immanuel through the Savior.**

Now let’s think about how Jesus Christ manifested his grace of Immanuel through the testimony of Apostle Matthew. Matthew was known as Levi the tax-collector (Mk 2:14). If he was a Levite, his career must have been considered scandalous due to his tribal heritage. In Jewish society, tax-collectors were branded as so-called public sinners like prostitutes and loan sharks, because they collaborated with Rome and exploited their fellow Jews for dishonest gain. Levi was atheistic and self-centered to the point of totally disregarding his spiritual heritage and reputation. He collected money mercilessly, closing his eyes to others’ sufferings. While pursuing selfish gain, he had completely lost the nobility of and respect for humanity. He was wealthy. But the inner cry of his conscience must have driven him to unbearable agony and despair, as he realized that he had gone too far to find a way out now.

Then one day, he saw Jesus standing in front of his office. Then Levi heard amazing words from Jesus’ lips, “Follow me.” “Me?” Levi stood up, totally struck. Jesus gently said to him, “Yes,” stretching his arms toward him. We can imagine Levi kneeling before Jesus and bursting into a loud and long cry in Jesus’ arms. Jesus called him, even though adding him to his disciples’ circle invited outrageous criticism from the religious leaders. Jesus answered, *“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners”* (Mt 9:12,13b; Mk 2:17; Lk 5:31-32). When Matthew recorded this event, he added a verse of Jesus’ words, “*But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice’* (Mt 9:13a)*.*Jesus called Levi out of his *mercy*, because he was sick with sin. Jesus dearly loved him as his own child regardless of his deep sickness of selfishness.

Matthew could not forget the love and grace of Jesus for him. So when he later recorded the names of the Apostles, he added “the tax collector” after his name. He wanted to tell the world that God came to save and honor a lost person like him. The Son of God, God Incarnate was with Levi as his Everlasting Father until he became Apostle and Saint Matthew. Through Jesus’ love, he found not only God his Creator, but also the absolute value of humans, beginning with himself. In Matthew 5:21-26, Matthew included Jesus’ words that are not in other gospels; “*I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Anyone who says to a brother or sister…‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell. Therefore, if you…remember that your brother or sister has something against you…first go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.”* This is Jesus’ deeper interpretation of God’s sixth commandment, *“You shall not murder.”* (Ex 20:13). Levi must have heard many curse words from others and he might have also uttered many filthy words to them in return. Through Jesus, however, he learned that every person, no matter who he/she is, is absolutely valuable in God and is therefore an object of respect and love.

Jesus’ parable in Matthew 13:44-46 that is unique in Matthew’s gospel also carries his testimony; *“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls.**When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.”* The gist of this parable is the supreme value of the kingdom of heaven. Be it a mundane person like a man who happened to find treasure in a field or a truth-seeker like a merchant looking for fine pearls, anyone who finds the kingdom of heaven will pay any cost joyfully to possess it. In fact, this is what Matthew did when Jesus called him. In Jesus, Matthew saw the holy God who came to dwell among his people. In Jesus, Matthew found peace with God and people that transcends all circumstances. Moreover, Matthew found the enormous treasures that will never perish, spoil or fade that are stored for him and all God’s people in the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew could not forget the love of Jesus who sold everything—his heavenly glory as God and even his life as a man--in order to purchase him to be his treasured possession. In return, Matthew left everything he had and gained the Christ and his kingdom. Revelation 21:1-4 say, *“Then I saw ‘a new heaven and a new earth,’ for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away….**And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.**He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’”* Jesus’ birth was Immanuel, God with us, that begins on earth through redemption by his blood and consummates in the eternal kingdom of God. Tradition says that Matthew preached this good news in Ethiopia, Macedonia and Parthia. Some say that he was martyred and others say that he finished his natural life. His end is not important. The most important thing is that Matthew came to know God’s love in Jesus Christ and he entered into an eternal love relationship with God. I can confess that Matthew’s story is my story. It is and can be your story too.

Is Jesus worthy of being your superstar? More than a superstar, right? If you confess that he is Immanuel, what voice of him do you hear at this Christmas? John 12:26 comes to my mind; “*Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.”* Jesus calls each of us to enter into an eternal love relationship with him by following him to where he would be and serving people with his heart and love. Matthew concluded his gospel with the Lord Jesus’ promise, *“And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age”* (Mt 28:20). Some of you may be in a difficult time in your life. The Lord Jesus who is able to empathize with all our weaknesses is interceding for you at the right hand of God. Neither death nor life, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord! God, who did not spare his only Son, will also graciously give you all things. (Ro 8:32-39) May the Lord fill your soul with his grace of Immanuel at this Christmas and throughout the New Year.