

The Immanuel Principal  
Noticing God with us  
Exodus 3:12; The Story (Chapter 4: Deliverance Page 46)  
Pastor Randy McNeal – October 2, 2011

***Intro***

***“The Immanuel Principal”***

You may have noticed that we sang a song that is normally a Christmas song. “Oh Come Emmanuel” is probably my favorite worship song and definitely my favorite Christmas song. I love what it speaks of and it fits perfectly within The Story today.

As we look at the story of Israel being delivered from Egypt the song calls for Immanuel to come and “ransom captive Israel”. That metaphor could work today but it’s not why I asked to sing it. I asked because I want to talk to you today about something that is important, even vital, for me in my life: The Immanuel Principal.

“Immanuel” means “God with Us”. Pastor Dave calls it the “withedness of God” and any way you want to describe it, the meaning is that God is with us. For us, we know the end of the story and that ultimately this Immanuel Principal fulfilled in Christ and experienced through the Holy Spirit. While that’s cool enough for its own sermon, we are in a series and I think this principal of “God with us” is important in the story we read for this week as well as the story we find ourselves.

Let’s take a look at the Story. Turn in your Bible to Exodus 17:7, or in The Story, Page 57. Remember that there are two perspectives as we read through this Story. There is the Upper Story, think heavenly and God’s perspective. Then there is the Lower Story, or Earthly, human perspective. As I read in preparation I couldn’t help but interject my own story and I pray that as I preach you will find yourself caught up in how you are also a part of the story in your own way.

If you have The Story with you, you will notice we are looking at the end of this week’s chapter. In the end we find Israel asking a question:

***Lower Story (human perspective)***

“Is the Lord among us or not” Pg. 57 The Story Exodus 17:7

This symbolizes the Lower Story.

Israel’s question: Is God     (With Us)    ?

Maybe, like me, you were caught off guard by this question. I thought to myself “Are you kidding me?”

Let’s think about this. Moses comes and performs signs to show you that he is from God. Then God calls down all sorts of plagues on Egypt so that Pharaoh will let you go. As you travel you are led by God represented by a pillar of fire at night and a cloud by day. Then the sea is parted for you to cross but closes on Pharaoh’s army. You then get bread from heaven, quail in the wilderness, bitter water turned sweet and water from a rock and you ask:

“Is God with us or not?”

Can you feel the disappointment that God must have had for the people? God had been with them all along, in fact, God was fulfilling a promise; a promise that he made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and also, Moses.

If you turn back to earlier in the Story, pg. 46 or Exodus 3:12 you will see what I'm talking about. God has just finished explaining how God is going to use Moses to deliver Israel from Egypt. God explained that God has remembered the covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Interestingly enough, a burning bush that never burned up and the voice of God wasn't enough for Moses. He still had to know:

"How am I going to do all of this?"

To which God responds in Exodus 3:12:

**Upper Story (God's perspective)**

"I will be with you" Pg 46 The Story Exodus 3:12

God's promise: To be     (with them)    !

This is our upper story.

It's as if the creator of the universe who is speaking to Moses from a burning bush says:

"duh"

It really is that simple. God will be with Moses, God will be with Israel and God will be with us.

The Immanuel Principal: God with Us.

So imagine...God has promised to be with Moses and Israel. God then shows up in multiple ways visibly and invisibly through circumstances and in the end Israel asks:

"Is God even with us?"

I have to confess that when I read this I didn't do so from God's perspective as if I wouldn't have made the same mistake in my own life. The fact is: I can go all day, I can go all week without noticing God. And so can you because we aren't looking.

It's easy to see God in our mountain top experiences. Whether a great time of worship, a spiritual retreat, God's providence in healing or finances, and all other joys in life. In youth ministry we create a schedule around mountain top experiences. Our big events are meant to get kids fired up about their faith. Fall Retreat for the High Schoolers is next week and we are asking the question: Who is Jesus to you? in an effort to refocus. Faceplant and Powderburn are full of great worship, talks and discussions about living for Christ. Camp, Mission Trips and you better believe CHIC will all be Mountain Top experiences. Times in kids' lives when they say "I really saw God there".

It's easy to see God after we've come through a time of pain, when we come out of the valley. During the pain we don't see God and are blind to the fact that God was carrying us through but hind sight is 20/20 right? And when we look back we think "God really helped me through".

We see God in the Mountain Tops and we see God in the Valleys. The problem is we don't live in either regularly. Life is lived on the plain.

When is the last time you noticed God in the plain? The ordinary? The day to day, mundane, boringness of life?

I can tell you I ask the question of our youth when I'm out one on one: "Where have you seen God in your life?". The answer is: Powderburn, CHIC, mission trips, my parent's divorce, the death of my Grandma and so on. Never is it: When I was at school today, when I was driving home, when I was eating dinner with my family.

For the youth I've talked to it's always in the big moments that they remember God. For me it's mostly big moments that I remember God and therefore it's safe to assume that for you, it's mostly big moments when you see God.

We are in danger of being like Israel and finishing our weeks saying "is God with us or not" when all along God is saying:

Immanuel: "I am with you"

When Moses asked "who should I say sent me" God responds "I AM who I am. Tell them I AM has sent you".

Jesus echoes this phrase in the book of John with his various "I am" statements. "I am" the good shepherd. "I am" the resurrection. Before Moses was "I am".

God is not the God of past. God is not the God of future. God is the God that stands outside of time. God is the God of right now.

Do you notice that? Do you see God in the present moments of life?

God is not only God in the celebrations and mourning periods. God is God always. Do you notice that?

One author describes it this way saying:

*"Within the church calendar there are three main seasons: fasting (Advent and Lent), feasting (Christmas and Easter), and ordinary time, for most of the time in between."*<sup>1</sup>

Another says:

*"God comes to us not to overwhelm us and overpower us, but to interrupt us in the midst of our ordinary routines, on the ground of what is familiar to us—everyday life, the arena in which most of life with God takes place. He whispers rather than shouts, gently prompts rather than shoves, 'I am with you—will you be with Me?'"*<sup>2</sup>

It's both a fact and a promise that God is with you; Immanuel. The question, your part of the story is:

Will you be with God?

### **Our Liturgy**

You probably noticed that we have read scripture together more today than normal. There is a point to that. In Catholic and Lutheran circles they read a lot of scripture, creeds, prayers, and other forms of liturgy together. Liturgy is simply a ritualized practice. Something they do over and over again so that it can form their worship service.

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<sup>1</sup> Clark, Jason Church in the Present Tense Grand Rapids, MI:Brazos Press 2011 (82)

<sup>2</sup> Foster, Richard Life With God San Francisco: HarperOne, 2005 (185)

We have liturgies here too. We have an opening song as you walk in. We meet and greet after announcements. We have an offering that ends with us all standing during the last verse and a benediction. We are a liturgical church because we have ritualized practices.

Liturgy, as a ritualized practice, is even present in our daily lives whether they include God or not. Every morning I drink 2 ½ cups of coffee. One must go down before I can even consider doing anything other than sitting half asleep. I also always drink a bottle of Gatorade to help replenish my electrolytes and hydrate after the coffee. I do this everyday whether at home or traveling. It's part of my liturgy, a ritual that forms my day. Without it I would literally be sick. Why can't I have that about praying or reading my Bible?

### A Personal Liturgy: A Ritualized practice of noticing God

I'm going to suggest that we learn from the Israelites' mistake and begin to notice God more. Let's develop a liturgy, ritualized practice, which encourages that to happen. In order to do this I think it's important for you to know that I in no way am an expert at this. All this week God has been convicting me, asking "do you notice me?" I'm on this journey with you. Most of what I am about to share with you is taken from experts in this field. In fact, at one point I wrote something and thought "that's so good! But, man that sounds familiar" only to find it was something I had read a couple years ago.

Richard Foster wrote Life with God and Brother Lawrence The Practice of the Presence of God. It's from these two great authors that I pull material from as well as some of my colleagues in seminary.

From my studies I think there are three things that can help us do just that. They aren't on your notes so if you are a note taker, flip that page over and write these down.

Rule number one for developing a personal liturgy:

#### **1. *It's not about you***

The youth are smiling because we beat this over their head all summer. Ask them for help; they are experts.

It's not about you, it's about God.

James 4:3 says:

"When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with the wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures"

If we truly want to notice God we have to take ourselves out of the equation, at least at first. Don't miss-hear me. Your needs and your desires are important to God but they are only a piece. We are talking about the upper story here: God's perspective.

We can't always understand God's perspective but we trust it. For example, you may have been confused, shocked, or even angry when you read in The Story this week:

"And the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart". Why would God do that?

First, I in no way think that we will ever fully be able to understand the mind of God. God's thoughts and actions differ from how we understand. When we read the words of scripture we do so through a fallen, imperfect lens. God's actions are always perfect even if we don't understand. So when it says "God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" it's not as if God forgot about it but merely that's the only word we have to describe why God waited to follow through.

Second, God is outside of time (The "I am") and God's purposes often don't line up with our desired timing.

So when God hardens Pharaoh's heart we need to know that there is a perfectly good explanation for it AND we may never fully understand what that is because God is greater than we can comprehend.

God does give us some insight as to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. After leaving Egypt and traveling towards the Red Sea...

In Exodus 14:4 God says:

"I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them, so that I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army; and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord. And they did so".

You see, it wasn't about the Israelites' freedom but about God's glory. Up until this point God had only been revealed to the Israelites. There were other "gods" and kings, and rulers who thought they were gods all around. This was the beginning of God being revealed as the one, true, most high God to the other nations.

So that "Pharaoh and his army, and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord".

It's not about you or me or the Israelites but about God's glory.

The first thing to know about a personal liturgy is: "It's not about you".

## **2. *It's not about what you do***

If the Israelites had thought this way, maybe they would have been grateful for what God provided in freedom, food and water rather than constantly complaining.

I would say this concept is one of the biggest mistakes we've made in Christianity.

Ask anyone what it means to be a Christian and they will start listing things Christians do. As long as you do enough "good things" you will be fine and fine means you won't go to hell.

In fact, I've sat across from many Christians who are involved in pre marital sex, smoking pot, getting drunk and when I ask them "what does God think about it?" their answer is "Well, I'm a pretty good person so I don't really think God cares".

Have we forgotten what the Gospel really is?

The Gospel is not "do enough good things".

The Gospel is not "if I do enough good things I can afford to do some bad things".

If the Gospel were a line of credit you would be overdrawn, overdue, banks foreclosing, repossessing all you own and just when you think that there is nothing that can save you....

Immanuel, God with us, Jesus Christ.

Titus 3:5 says "Not by works of righteousness which we have done but according to his (Jesus) mercy he saved us".

It doesn't matter what you've done, it doesn't matter what you do. All that matters is what Christ DID for you on the cross. That's the Gospel. If not for the saving work of Christ we are nothing.

It's done, it's finished. It was accomplished through Christ on the cross and our gratitude for that work should motivate us.

If we really took stock of our lives and compared it to God we all fall short. None of us is worthy to be called children of God and yet we already are. And if we truly meditate on the fact that regardless of who we are and what we've done our debt has been paid by Christ, then we will be motivated by gratitude to do great things for the name of Christ.

It's not about what you do but ALL about what's been done for you. Because once you understand exactly what Christ did for you, you won't be able to help yourself by living a good life.

And you will live this good life, not because you need to earn anything and only because you are grateful for what Christ did.

The Gospel is that Christ died for you so that you might live.

Is that your motivation for a personal liturgy? If it's not, you better take some time to reflect on this person Jesus and what he did because it will change your life.

- 1. It's not about you**
- 2. It's not about what you do**
- 3. Just do it!**

Just do it. Do something and do it out of gratitude because God is with you. Will you be with God?

#### A personal testimony

Some of you have heard this story because I tell it often. It was a moment where Christ changed my life so radically that I can't help but be motivated. So I'm going to tell it again and I'm going to tell it often because it's how a personal liturgy saved my life.

When I was fresh out of college I was an angry person. I was angry at a couple people in my life and rightfully so in many respects. Not God's respect though. I remember one day sitting in a bus with my Spiritual Director. I asked, "What do I have to do to get over this?"

His response: "Pray"

"Give me a break". I said, "I'm a youth pastor, of course I pray".

Calmly he responded: "You can choose to deal with this now or we will still be here a year from now".

I'm betting a year to the day, in the same bus at the same stop we picked up our conversation.

"What can I do?" I said

"Pray", he said.

"I'm so sick of that answer", I responded

And then he smirked and said, "See you in a year".

It was then that I caved. I began to pray. It wasn't anything special or long. It was simple. "God, help me to see them through your eyes" because when you see someone with the Love of God

it's hard to be angry. No more than a month later my anger was gone. My relationships with these people restored and my life was changed.

I had formed a breath prayer; "God, help me to see them through your eyes". It was that simple. I think this is one of the easiest ways to notice God throughout our days. I'd encourage you to find other ways:

- set reminders in your phone
- write them on your mirror
- carry a little rock with you
- wear a bracelet

Do anything that will cause you to pause throughout your day and notice God. Just do it. It will save your life.

I'd like to close with a time to meditate on what we've learned from the Israelites and give you a chance to place yourself within God's Upper Story today by developing your own breath prayer. The instructions are in your bulletin and I will guide you through the activity.

Worship team will you also come back up?

### **Forming a 'Breath Prayer'**<sup>3</sup>

Sit in silence...allow God to call you by name : \_\_\_\_\_ ( your name)

Answer: What do you desire? \_\_\_\_\_ (single word or short phrase)

What name do you give God? \_\_\_\_\_ (i.e. Father, Lord, Christ, etc...)

Connect all these in a short prayer that can be said in a breath as you feel comfortable:

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*"To practice the presence of God is to take pleasure in and become accustomed to His Divine Company."*<sup>4</sup>

Where will you notice God this week?

### **Benediction**

So as you go throughout this week I'm going to ask that you do something a little different. Will you change your question from "what am I doing this week" to "what am I noticing"?

The first focuses on yourself and what you do. I'm asking you to notice God working.

Will you ask this of yourself? Will you ask those you are in fellowship with?

Will you ask the staff what we are noticing instead of what we are doing?

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<sup>3</sup> Foster, Richard Prayer New York: Harper Collins 1992 (123)

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence, Brother Practice of the Presence of God Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press 1985 (125)

If God is not working, if Christ is not present and the Holy Spirit not moving, then at best we are only a social club with good morals.

I think we are meant for more than that. I think we are meant to notice God in ordinary, day to day, boringness in life that we may love out of gratitude for what Christ did on the cross.

So go, and notice Immanuel. God IS with you. Amen.