

IMMANUEL – **INCOMPLETE JOY** - You can turn to Luke 1

“Oh Come Oh Come Emmanuel”

Isaiah 7 is where we find Immanuel/Emmanuel.

Isaiah is an odd place to find any prophetic pointing to Christmas.

Isaiah doesn't have many Christmassy *“come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant vibes.”*

It's addressing a nation of Israel that was a good bit faithless, joy-less, and facing judgement.

The word and name **Immanuel** means God WITH US.

It means God hears our cry and is present with us.

Isaiah 7's prophecy of Immanuel and this virgin giving birth also prophetically points to its fulfillment in Luke 1

Here in Luke 1, when the virgin Mary is told she will miraculously bear Jesus – it begs the humble questions how, and the angel points to Mary's relative Elizabeth, said to be barren in old age, who was actually with child.

READ LUKE 1:39-47 - “At that time Mary got ready and hurried to...”

First - Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she prophesies in a loud, glad, or exuberant voice depending on translation.

Second - John – the boy in her womb – leapt for **joy**.

Then, as a response to this – Mary responds verse 46 with the Magnificat, her explosion of praise, in which she opens saying “how my spirit **rejoices!**”

The fruit of this coming together is resounding joy and rejoicing.

2 John vs 12 – “I have much more to say to you, but I don't want to do it with paper and ink. For I hope to visit you soon and talk with you face to face. THEN our joy will be complete.”

John – like Mary – wants to hop on a donkey with a full tank of gas and go see these people and be WITH them. THEN, he says, our joy will be **complete**.

There's a lot of talk about joy at Christmas, especially Christmas carols.

“Joyful all ye nations rise” and “mountains echo back joyous strains”

But imagine if they sang of a joy that wasn't complete.

Imagine the song was called - *“Incomplete joy to the world...”*

You don't want a gift that's incomplete.

David says in **Psalm 16** that *“in God's presence is fullness of joy.”*

In **John 15** Jesus says our joy will be complete if we keep his command to love one another.

No doubt this is what John also had in mind when he wrote his letters to the church and spoke of joy's completion. **1 John 1:4** – *“We write this to make our joy complete.”*

But in his follow up letters he stops short of saying the joy is completed by the writing. Why? John is longing for more than writing to them, but the renewal of fellowship.

John implies that joy fills our cup when we make room for others.
And not just anybody – the church.

This isn't the same John we read about in Luke who was family to Mary, at least by DNA... But in a way they are both Mary's family.

John's adoption, if you'd call it that, was pretty informal.
Jesus says but a few words: **"Dear woman, here is your son."**
And he says to John: **"Here is your mother."**
But it says from here John took her into his home.

Steph and I nearly a decade ago now stepped into the formal international adoption process that lasted half a decade...

I'll never forget the equation they tell you in adoption classes. That for every year spend in an orphanage, you can expect to **subtract 4 or more months per year** from that child's development. Not just physical development – height, weight, walking, wearing diapers, etc. But psychological development – The ability to communicate. The ability to relate. The ability to give and receive affection.

There's what's called a **cycle of unmet needs**.
Connections aren't made in the brain, and growth is hindered.

Growth is found when that cycle of unmet needs is broken and slowly those needs are met until THAT becomes a cycle. One of experiencing love.

Just like children need families to grow...

And we should expect hindered development outside of those connections...

**We aren't called to live spiritually orphaned, but physically present in a family of faith.
And without it, we should expect our spiritual development to be hindered.**

Without a life immersed in the family of faith... there's cycles of unmet need in your life.

Without a life done in the family of faith, face to face... our joy can remain incomplete.

Two steps to a fuller joy this Christmas:

First - **BREAK THE CURVE**

Christina Cleveland's **"Disunity in Christ"** - In it she gives an account of another man as they were on a church trip in the same bus. He kind of rubbed her the wrong way. Not that there was anything inherently wrong with him. Just his personality, his style, and his perspectives left her looking for ways to distance herself from him on the trip. Then she was struck with the thought, I'm spending eternity with this guy.

"That's OK, Heaven is going to be a big, big place."

I thought of an entirely different book I had read around the same time ...and it's about a bus trip taken from hell to heaven... The Great Divorce. CS Lewis's metaphoric dream of Heaven and Hell. It's fantasy, and in the intro Lewis begs his readers to remember it as such. But it's still fascinating and profound.

In the Great Divorce, the boundaries of Hell expand like the universe, even increasing. Like Christina Cleveland's momentary picture of heaven... ***Hell is a big, big place.*** It takes centuries to get from one end to the other. The reason is because as people take up residence in Hell they want to get as far away from one another as possible. Hell in the Great Divorce is you in isolation, consumed by self into eternity. And those in Hell chose it as they are consumed by self.

You go back from current authors like Christina Cleveland to CS Lewis, And then go back farther still...

Augustine once spoke of a life "**Incurvatus in Se**" – curved in on itself. A life curved in on oneself rather than outward for others. Only the needs within us. No room for God or others.

It's like Lewis' famous quote: It is not a question of God "sending us" to hell. In each of us there is something growing, which will BE hell unless it is nipped in the bud.

"Incurvatus in Se" reminds me that I need to break the curve in me to live for myself absent of God or others.

2 John 1:12

John is saying I don't want to lean on the technology of my day to maintain relationship, I want to be WITH you, face to face. Ink and papyrus was the closest equivalent to email, text, or alike that was available—a tool to communicate without being there face to face. It was that days humble technology. But John didn't want to lean into it too much.

You see, **technological innovations are invitations to take a fresh look at our beliefs and how we walk them out with our habits.** And we are swimming in innovations these days.

David Nutt, the world renowned professor of neuropsychopharmacology writes in his book "**Drink?**"

"Social inhibition is one of the cardinal features of humanity."

He explained that rightfully so, humans are wired as suspicious of other people.

Other people from other tribes can have other interests, etc.

Alcohol helps curb this innate tendency to be inhibited in public. We like this.

Social media is much the same...

But beyond social media, a technological innovation that gave a crucial invitation to the Church when COVID hit was livestreaming services.

What a gift that platform is.

But like other technological innovations, livestreaming invites us to look at our beliefs and adapt our habits.

And like all of social media, online church gives us the ability to be connected.

Technology has allowed us to become more connected than ever, and yet feel more isolated than ever. How is this?

Social inhibition is our cardinal feature... so we long to escape risky, awkward, honest, embodied human interaction. And technology allows us to largely avoid risky human interaction. So we've slowly been conditioned to chalk up "awkward" or "challenging" or "uncomfortable" as something to be resisted, rather than a tool to grow. A tool God uses to shape us.

If we aren't careful, technology is fertilizer on what CS Lewis says is growing in all of us and needs to be nipped in the bud.

If we aren't careful, it can exacerbate what Augustine diagnoses – this inward curve toward self and our comfort above all else.

Jesus broke this curve. And if we are going to follow him we must do the same.

If we find it too messy or risky or painful to be present and engage with embodied, flesh and blood people...what does that say about us as followers of Christ?

Pastor Fred last weekend: *If Jesus fit into humanity... you and I can certainly fit into the lifestyle He wants us to have, a lifestyle defined by incarnational living, being tangibly present for one another in the family of God.*

(And I echo the same caveats he did – in this season there are certainly people who are staying away from a local gathering of believers for good reasons – those with health concerns and new babies and alike. Or the elderly and immuno compromised)

But the incarnation of Jesus, Immanuel, is more than God's plan for salvation.

It's God's example for us. He expects us to be tangibly present with one another!

Social inhibition may be a cardinal feature of humanity.

But community is a cardinal feature of divinity.

The trinity is 3 in 1, community and fellowship eternally.

Break the Curve, but also... **EMBRACE THE CHURCH**

John also wrote in John 3:7 (quoting Jesus) "Don't be amazed that I told you that you must be born again." That first you? It's singular because he's addressing Nicodemus and not a crowd. That second you? It's plural because he's not just telling Nicodemus he must be born again. All of humanity needs to be born again.

In one of Jesus' most pivotal statements about salvation and his very purpose for coming, it's plural, not singular. But often in our individualistic culture Christianity can become the religion of the individual. And if we aren't careful, our Bible reading can lose context and fuel this.

There are at over **4,700** verses verses in the Bible (some roughly 2700 in the Hebrew Bible and 2000 in the Greek) with *you plural* translated into English as "you" ...which could lead a reader to think it is directed the individual rather than the nation of God's people or the Church community.

Likewise when Paul writes and says "He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion." It isn't singular - it's plural. When he says "work out your salvation," it isn't singular - it's plural.

Why? He's writing a **church**, not just an individual.

And that growth is going to take shoulder to shoulder, face to face **church** community.

Living alone and independent, spiritually orphaned stunts your growth.
You live with cycles of unmet need.

If you're holding out because you're waiting for your ideal church, I issue a warning from the lips of **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**:

"Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than they love the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community."

You might say well that's a big harsh... let's go to the Bible then...

Proverbs 18:1 - *"those who care only for themselves spit on the common good."*

Solomon in all his wisdom knew that in and of ourselves we are curved inward toward ourselves. But God calls us to break from our social inhibition and care for community. And the greater context of Scripture shows us that it's not just any community. It's the body of believers. The family of faith. The local church.

CARLO CARRETTO - *God loves what is not yet. What has still to come to birth. What WE love in a person is what already is: virtue, beauty, courage and hence our love is self-interested and fragile. God, loving what is not yet and putting faith in us, continually begets us, since love is what begets... love is what helps us emerge from our darkness and draws us to the light. And this is such a fine thing to do that God invites us to do the same.*

At Christmas we repeat Isaiah's picture of those who were walking in darkness and have seen a great light. Emerging from the darkness, being drawn to the light.. as Carretto writes... takes stepping out of a love that is self interested and fragile. Breaking the inward curve, nipping in the bud our inward focus, and turning our hearts and focus outward in love.