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John 18:3-12

NAMES OF WONDROUS LOVE-IMMANUEL

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It is something that we cannot comprehend in our limited minds, but somehow there was a conversation in heaven. God the Father spoke to his beloved Son and said, "Son, the only way to free mankind from the curse of sin is for you to become a human being. You must become mankind's substitute. You will come into the world as a single human cell, implanted into a virgin by the power of the Holy Spirit. You will continue to grow in her womb for nine months and then you will be born a helpless child. You will become a servant who will forego most of the things that humans desire. You will be put under the Law, and you will also die a very painful death. You will be forsaken not only by the human friends that you will meet, but you will also be forsaken by me. It will be a very painful and shameful death, but you will rise from the dead on the third day. Would you be willing to accept that mission?"

We know the answer to that one, don't we? That is why we are here this evening. We don't know the actual words that The Father and the Son used, but we do know the results. When the fullness of time came, Jesus Christ, true God from all eternity, also became true man. As the Athanasian Creed states: "Christ is not two persons but one, one, not by changing the deity into flesh, but by taking the humanity into God." Jesus did not give up being God, but rather he also became something that he had not been before. He became man. He became a human being. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. Ponder that one for a while.

And ponder these things as well. As God, Christ gave the law. As man, he was subject to it. As the God-man his perfect keeping of the Law counts for you and me. As God, he could not die. As man, he was subject to death. As the God-man, he died and with his holy, precious blood he paid for the sin of the world.

God is with us. Doesn't that boggle the mind? Imagine that in your daily life. Someone at your office is really God. Someone standing in line at the grocery store is really God. Someone sitting in the barber chair, getting his haircut is really God. Someone sitting in the bleachers, watching the Tiger game is really God. Would you believe that? It was very difficult for people 2000 years ago to believe it as they saw him preach on the mountainsides or walk along the shore of the Sea of Galilee or teach in the Temple courts of Jerusalem. But it was true. God was with them.

It should not have been surprising. God predicted this miracle through the prophet Isaiah. Joseph was told by the angel: "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel which means God with us.'" Yes, that child that would be born would be God with us.

Most people did not recognize that God was with us because he did not always use the power that he had as God. There was always a demand for a miracle or two or twenty. After all, isn't that what we would do if we were God, and we came to earth? Wouldn't we make ourselves comfortable? Wouldn't we want to destroy our enemies? Jesus looked and acted like a lowly servant. How could that possibly be God with us?

What do you think Malchus would have said? He was the servant of the high priest who stood there in shock as his ear had been sliced off by Peter's sword in one second and in the next, miraculously restored by Jesus' loving touch. Do you think that Malchus viewed Jesus as a mere man?

Or how about the Roman soldiers who were sent to arrest Jesus? There were a lot of them. John uses the word "cohort" which denotes a body of 600 soldiers. Perhaps not all of them were there that evening to hunt down this dangerous man, but there were many. All the Gospel writers speak of a large crowd or multitude that came to the Garden of Gethsemane. The Jewish leaders were not going to leave anything to chance. They would make sure that Jesus was not going to get away.

The soldiers had to be surprised for a number of reasons. They had come equipped with torches and lanterns to hunt Jesus down when he tried to flee, yet Jesus would walk forward to meet them. They had come armed with swords and clubs to fight Jesus' followers, yet Jesus would tell them to put their weapons away. They had come to arrest this man, yet as he spoke the words, "I am he" they all fell to the ground helpless. How could such a thing be possible? These were Roman soldiers, tough, rugged, and ready for anything.

There was only one explanation. Jesus would show them who really was in charge. They were not arresting him. Jesus would voluntarily surrender himself into their hands, foregoing the power that he had as God. Yes, it was truly laughable. Jesus could have simply given the command and 72,000 angels could have surrounded his enemies and wiped them out. Jesus would go willingly. "He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth."

Jesus was not caught off-guard. Jesus knew all that was going to happen to him. There were no surprises. There was no point in Jesus' suffering where he could say, "This isn't what I signed up for." He knew it all in the Garden of Gethsemane, every lash of the whip, every punch to the face, every cruel and sadistic word, every nail that would pierce his flesh, every friend that would run away, every bitter fire of hell that would sear his soul. He knew what was coming and yet he willingly gave himself up.

Did you stop to consider those simple words, "I am he?" They're easy to overlook. Yet let's step back a minute. When Moses was called to lead Israel out of slavery, he asked God what was his name. God replied, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM' has sent me to you." The very name LORD comes from the Hebrew verb form "to be." God is the great I AM. He is not "I was," a has-been, nor "I will be," hoping to evolve into something greater. He is the same yesterday, today and always.

How many times don't we see Jesus in the Gospel of St. John describe himself with the words I AM? I am the Bread of Life. I am the Resurrection and the Life. I am the Good Shepherd. I am the Gate. I am the Light of the World. I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Every time Jesus uses these words, he is speaking of his deity. He is truly God. These are things that can be said only of God. They are exclusive. No mere man may make those claims. Even those words "I am He," were used before. As our Lord met with the Samaritan woman at the well, she said, "I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." Jesus replied, "I who speak to you am he."

He was God and always was God and always is God and he is with us. He loved us and he loved the world with a love that we cannot understand. As he described himself as the Good Shepherd, he said, "The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life – only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again."

Jesus is Immanuel. He is God with us. So many people have this idea of God being some thing far out there in the universe. It might be more powerful than we are and it might be smarter than we are, but this thing called God is as detached from us as we are from an ant hill. Is that really the case? Absolutely not! Jesus is here with us, and he is here to comfort us. He tells us through his Word, "Be of good cheer! Your sins are forgiven! He paid for them in full. Every time we celebrate the Sacrament, he reminds us of that, giving us his very body and blood to assure us of that forgiveness. If he is God, then we receive the very body and blood of God. That shows the complete payment for all our sins.

He is with us in all our troubles, and they are many in a sinful world. Jesus knew the troubles of this world because he experienced them himself. He knows what it is like to lose a loved one to death. He wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus. I'm sure that he wept at other funerals as well. We know what it is like to fight temptations that come upon us. Jesus fought those temptations. Last Sunday we saw his victory over Satan in the wilderness. His victory is our victory. He knows what it is like to be lonely and hurt by friends. Everything that he experienced in the passion was real.

He knows the struggles we have. He knows the sinful condition of our souls. He knows our frustration to want to do what is right before God, yet our inclination to do what our sinful flesh wants. The good things we want to do, we don't, but the evil we don't want to do, that we find ourselves doing. He is there to pick us up when we fall and to give us strength for a new day. He is there to encourage us and to forgive us. He is here with us through Word and Sacrament.

And he is here with us as our life here on earth comes to its end. We say with the Psalmist: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff comfort me." Jesus knows that valley well. He walked through it before us. He defeated death by his resurrection. He assures us that death cannot harm us. We are his forever. He is God with us, and he gives us the same assurance that he gave the first century disciples, "I am with you always even to the very end of the age."

What a wonderful blessing we have. God is with us through his Son Jesus, now and forever! Thanks be to God!
AMEN.