



Presbyterians *Read*

Third Week of Advent

Emmanuel in the Midst of a Pandemic

Open the Gathering with Prayer — *Choose your own prayer or read Psalm 46 responsively.*

Gathering Prompt — *Choose one invitation to start connecting with each other and the week's themes.*

Give everyone a minute to think of *one word* that summarizes their experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. Share your words and a brief explanation of why you chose the word you did.

In this chapter, Hamilton delves deeper into the theology of the incarnation. Before we discuss Hamilton's explanation, what are some ways you've heard the incarnation explained? How would you explain the incarnation if someone asked?

Overview — *A short summary of the chapter to remind participants of the main themes.*

Isaiah's Prophecy — Isaiah's prophecy that "a young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall call him Immanuel" (7:14) was written in approximately 735 BC and foretold how "God was about to work at the time the prophecy was written" (98). Even though this prophecy addressed "the specific circumstances of the prophet's day," its foretelling of how God would enter the world through a baby continued to give hope and meaning to generations of Jewish people after Isaiah. It is this hope that Matthew draws on in writing his version of the story of Jesus' birth.

Emmanuel — Matthew is the only gospel that draws on the prophecy from Isaiah 7:14. Even though the prophecy was about a child who lived eight hundred years before Christ—a child born to serve as a sign of God's presence with King Ahaz—Matthew "found in this somewhat obscure verse a powerful picture of who Jesus is and why he came" (100). Jesus' unique identity as God made flesh makes the name Emmanuel, which means "God with us," a perfect title for him.

God with Us — God became human in Jesus. This has powerful implications for us as humans. As Hamilton explains, “God doesn’t just imagine what it’s like to be human... He *really* knows what it is like to be weak, scared, tempted, or hurt” (103). The incarnation continues to have a shaping impact on humans to this day. Jesus told his followers “I am always with you, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). Jesus *continues* to be with us (109), which means that, even when we are going through difficult things, we do not need to fear.

Inquiry — *Initial questions, thoughts, new ideas arising out of the reading.*

What details in this chapter were new or interesting to you?

How have these details enriched, shaped or challenged your understanding of Christ’s birth?

Scripture — *Re-read key scripture passages together.*

The following two passages highlight the great mystery of the incarnation: Jesus is fully divine and fully human. As you read, take note of which details highlight this mystery.

Matthew 1:18–25

AND

Hebrews 1:1–3

Discussion — *Questions related to the scripture passage.*

What details from the above scripture passages point to Jesus as fully divine and which point to his humanity?

How do these scripture passages help us to understand the purpose of the incarnation? What insight do they provide into how the incarnation impacted the world and our everyday lives?

The incarnation is described as a mystery because it reveals a truth about God that we cannot completely comprehend. While we know some things about the incarnation, we are not capable of fully explaining the *how* of the incarnation. How do you feel about the reality that many aspects of Christian faith are a mystery?

Living Practices — *Practices connected to the theme for participants to engage in between sessions.*

“All of us are called to follow Emmanuel, and in turn, to incarnate his presence and love to others” (p. 113).

Compassion — Life during and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic has been challenging for many people. We are called to “incarnate Jesus’ presence and love for others,” and practicing radical compassion is one way that we can do this. Jesus showed compassion



Margret Hofheinz-Döring. Holy Family, from *Art in the Christian Tradition*, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library.

to people whose pain often went unrecognized or was ignored by others. This week, you are invited to intentionally cultivate and demonstrate compassion for others.

- Choose one way you can show compassion for someone this week. After you have done so, talk to someone about what it was like for you to do this.
- Bring to mind someone you have trouble having compassion for. Ask God to show you how God sees that person. Note what comes to your mind about that person over the next few days. Pray for God to give you the thoughts, words and actions you'll need to be compassionate towards that person.
- Recall a time when someone has shown you compassion. What were the circumstances? How did it feel to be on the receiving end of compassion? Pray for that person.

This "Living Practices" section has been adapted from ideas found in Adele Ahlberg Calhoun's *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (IVP, 2015)

Close the Gathering with Prayer — *Choose your own prayer or use the one below.*

EMMANUEL

Blessed are you,
God of creation and life.
You sent Christ who put on frail flesh
and he came to dwell among us as Emmanuel.

Born of Mary's body, he knew joy, pain, love and loss.
Touching the sick, he heals us;
breaking bread with the people around him,
he knew the pain of hunger, the pleasure of good food and the joy of fellowship;
dying on the cross, he knows our suffering;
rising from the grave, he brings us to everlasting life.

O Come, o come, Emmanuel, and lead us into the world you love
where we can serve and love you with our body, minds and souls.

Open us up to the meaning and power of your Good News made flesh,
and let us see your grace and goodness at work in the world around us.

