

Immanuel: God with us

Matthew 1:22-23 *"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."*

We are here today to celebrate the fulfilment of that prophecy. We are here to celebrate Immanuel. The day that a distant, aloof and somewhat terrifying God ... came near to us. A day when our Creator stepped into His creation in the most unbelievable way. A day when the God Himself stepped out of eternity into time ... out of the infinite glory of heaven into the finite world of man ... a day when the omnipotent Creator became one creation's most helpless creatures – a new born baby.

I could preach to you about the incarnation and the sin of man and then need for God to become one of us to redeem us from our sin. I could tell you about His journey from the cradle to the cross and how He lived a perfect life and died a final death on our behalf and how our faith in his life, death and resurrection will allow us to receive the gift of eternal life.

In fact I could preach a dozen different sermons this Christmas day ... but I find myself captured by the word Immanuel – which means God with us. I find myself contemplating the reason why God would do what He did in that stable in Bethlehem.

The theologians will tell us our need for salvation and our how Jesus has to be a man to redeem us etc. etc. But I want us to look through the theological mumbo jumbo this morning and see the heart of a God who desired to come near His children. Immanuel ... God came near. Immanuel ... God became intimate. Immanuel ... God got personal and entered our very humanity so that He would feel what we feel, live what we live, know the same limitations and the same temptations.

He was not content to be a distant deity ... removed from our real day to day existence. Not like Bette Midler's hit song which said that God was watching from a distance ... no, not our God ... he came as close as you could ever imagine ... He stepped right into our human world ... and then, not even as an adult ... He could have just turned up at the Jordon that day, been baptised and started His ministry ... no, our God wanted the whole human experience ... from conception to the grave.

Friends, let me encourage you today to contemplate Immanuel ... let me encourage you to see that in the midst of the saving, redeeming, wrath-appeasing ministry of Jesus Christ when He was here ... there is an even deeper message ... and even deeper reality wrapped up in the Christmas message ... and that Immanuel ... God is with us.

His human experience allows Him to relate to us at our deepest point of need. The Christmas story is about a God who is near ... a God who is here ... a God who is real ... a God who understands everything you feel and everything you ache for inside.

I want to share a true story with you this morning that touched my heart when I first heard it and gave me a vivid picture of what Immanuel really means today. I hope they have the same effect on you.

This story comes from a missionary Pastor's wife ...

I remember a day one winter that stands out like a boulder in my life. The weather was unusually cold, our salary had not been regularly paid, and it did not meet our needs even when it was.

My husband was away much of the time, travelling from one district to another. Our boys were well, but my little Ruth was ailing, and none of us were decently clothed. I patched and re-patched, with spirits sinking to the lowest ebb. The water gave out in the well and the wind blew through the cracks in the floor.

The people in the parish were kind, and generous too; but the settlement was new, and each family was struggling for itself. Little by little, at the time I needed it most my faith began to waiver. Early in life I was taught to take God at His word, and I thought my lesson was well learned. I had leaned upon the promises in dark times, until I knew as David did, "*who was my fortress and my deliverer.*"

Now a daily prayer for forgiveness was all that I could offer. My husband's coat was hardly thick enough for Spring, much less winter, and he was often obliged to ride miles to attend some meeting or funeral. Many times our breakfast was corn bread and a cup of tea without sugar.

Christmas was coming: the children always expected their presents. I remember the ice was thick and smooth and the boys were longing for a pair of ice-skates. Ruth, in some unaccountable way, had taken a fancy that the dolls I had made were no longer suitable; she wanted a nice large one, and insisted on praying for it.

I knew it seemed impossible, but oh I wanted to give each child their present. It seemed as if God had deserted us, but I did not tell my husband all this. He worked so earnestly and heartily. I supposed him to be as hopeful as ever.

I kept the lounge room cheerful with an open fire, and I tried to serve our scanty meals as invitingly as I could. The morning before Christmas James was called to see a sick man. I put a piece of bread in for his lunch - it was the best I could do. I wrapped my plaid shawl around his neck and then tried to whisper a promise as I often had, but the words died away upon my lips. I let him go without it.

That was a dark, hopeless day. I coaxed the children to bed early for I could not bear their chatter. When Ruth went to bed, I listened to her prayer. She asked for the last time most explicitly for her doll and for skates for her brothers. Her bright face looked so lively when she whispered to me, "*you know I think they'll be here early in the morning, mummy.*"

I sat down alone, and gave way to the bitterest tears.

Before long James returned, chilled and exhausted. He pulled off his boots. The thin socks slipped off with them, and his feet were blue with cold.

"I wouldn't treat a dog that way let alone a faithful servant," I said . Then as I glanced up and saw the hard lines in his face, and the look of despair, it flashed across my mind that James had let go too. I brought him a cup of tea, feeling sick and dizzy at the very thought. He took my hand and we sat for an hour without a word. I wanted to die and to meet God, and tell Him his promises were not true; my soul was so full of rebellious despair.

Suddenly, there came a sound of bells, a quick stop, and a loud knock at the door. James sprang up to open it. There stood Deacon White. *"A box came by express just before dark, I brought it around as soon as I could get away. Reckon it might be for Christmas. At any rate I said they shall have it tonight. Here is a turkey my wife asked me to fetch along, and these other things I believe belong to you."*

There was a basket of potatoes, and a bag of flour. Talking all the time he hurried in the box and then with a hearty good night he rode away. Still without speaking, James found a chisel and opened the box. He drew out first a red blanket, and then we saw that beneath it the box was full of clothing.

It seemed at that moment as if Christ fastened upon me a look of reproach. James sat down and covered his face with his hands, *"I can't touch them."* He exclaimed, *"I haven't been true, just when God was trying me to see if I could hold out. Do you think I could not see how you were suffering?"* I had no word of comfort to offer. I know now how to preach the awfulness of turning away from God.

"James", I said clinging to him, *"don't take it to heart like this. I am to blame. I ought to have helped you. We will ask him together to forgive us."*

"Wait a moment dear I can't talk now," He said. Then he went into another room. I knelt down, and my heart broke. In an instant all the darkness, all the stubbornness rolled away. Jesus came again and stood before me, with the loving word, *"daughter!"* came sweet promises of tenderness and joy of soul.

I was so lost in praise and gratitude that I forgot anything else. I don't know how long it was before James came back, but he too had found peace. *"Now my dear wife,"* he said, *"let us thank God together,"* and he then poured out words of praise, Bible words: for nothing else could express our thanksgiving.

It was 11 o'clock, the fire was low and there was the great box, and nothing touched but the warm blanket we needed. We piled on some fresh logs, lit two candles, and began to examine our treasure. We drew out an overcoat. I made James put it on; just the right size, and I danced around him. Then there was a cloak, and he insisted in seeing me in it. My spirits always affected him, and we both laughed like foolish children.

There was a warm suit of clothes also and three pairs of woollen hose. There was a dress for me, yards of flannel, a pair of arctic overshoes for each of us. In mine was a slip of paper. I have it now and plan to hand it down to my children. It was Jacob's blessing to Asher, *"thy shoes shall be iron and brass and as the days so shall thy strength be."*

In the gloves, evidently for James, the same dear hand had written, *"I the Lord thy God, will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee, Fear not I will help thee."*

It was a wonderful box, and packed with thoughtful care. There was a suit of clothes for each of the boys, and a little red gown for Ruth. There were mittens, scarves and hoods. Down in the centre of the box was another box. We opened it and there was a great wax doll. I burst into tears again.

James wept with joy. It was too much. We then both exclaimed again, because close behind it came two pair of skates. There were books for us to read, some of them I had wished to see, stories for the children to read, aprons and underclothing, knots of ribbon, a beautiful little teddy bear, a lovely photograph, needles, buttons, thread and actually a muff, and an envelope containing a ten-dollar gold piece. We sat and cried over everything we unpacked.

It was past midnight, and we were faint and exhausted even with happiness. I made a cup of tea and cut a fresh loaf of bread and James boiled some eggs. We drew up the table before the fire, how we enjoyed our supper! And then we sat talking over our life and how sure a help God always proved.

You should have seen the children the next morning, the boys raised a shout at the sight of their skates. Ruth caught up her doll and hugged it tightly without a word then she went to her room and knelt by her bed. When she came back, she whispered to me, *"I knew they would be there, mummy, but I wanted to thank God just the same."*

We went to the window and there were the boys out of the house already and skating on the ice with all their might.

My husband and I tried to return thanks to the church in the east that sent us the box and we have tried to give thanks to God every day since that amazing Christmas Eve.

Hard times have come again and again, but we have trusted Him, dreading nothing so much as a doubt of His love and protecting care. Over and over again we have proved that *"they that seek the Lord shall not want anything."*

As wonderful as that Christmas Eve was – to see the joy on our children's faces as they enjoyed their gifts – it was on that night that we gained a deeper appreciation of the greatest gift of all: Immanuel, God with us – now and forever.