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**The Immanuel Gift**  
**Isaiah 7: 10- 14; Matthew 1: 18-24**

The irony is, the one to whom God first tried to give the Immanuel gift didn't want it! It was a gift fit for a king, for Ahaz, the king of Judah -- albeit a craven corrupt, notoriously opportunistic king -- but God sent him the prophet Isaiah at a time when this king happened to be worried. He had opted out of an alliance with the kings of Israel and Syria in a plot against the powerful Assyrians. These former allies had retaliated by invading Judah with the intent of deposing Ahaz and replacing him. Out of this obscure set of political and military circumstances the Immanuel gift was born. Ahaz was out inspecting his city's defenses when Isaiah met him on the wall to try and calm his nerves. "Don't worry about this threat from Israel and Syria. Their armies are minor nuisances. Don't over-react!" But Isaiah saw fear in Ahaz's eyes and added, "Look, I've been authorized by God to give you a gift to confirm the truth of my counsel. God will send you a sign: a young woman will soon conceive and bear a child, and they will call his name, 'Immanuel. God with us.' Before this child is old enough to distinguish between good and evil the threat offered by these minor kings will vanish. Just relax! God is with us! The child 'Immanuel' will prove it. God offers us the present of His presence."

Ahaz did not trust the sign of Immanuel. Instead, he cut a deal with the Assyrians, sitting on the sidelines and watching Assyria destroy Israel and Syria. But he surrendered the independence of his nation in the exchange. From then on, Judah was a vassal state, paying tribute to Assyria. Moreover, Ahaz set up altars in Jerusalem to the Assyrian gods and mimicked their barbaric practice of sacrifice by slaying one of his sons on an Assyrian altar to appease them. Even so, the Immanuel gift came anyway -- in the form of another of Ahaz's sons, Hezekiah, who grew up to be a righteous king who undid many of the wrongs perpetrated by his father. Long and good though his reign was, Hezekiah's rule eventually ended; he died. But the Immanuel promise did not die with him. The people of Judah continued to hold to the promise that God would one day send the gift of a Deliverer, and this hope endured throughout the ages as the Assyrians gave way to Babylon, and Babylon gave way to Persia, and Persia gave way to Greece and Greece gave way to Roman domination, so that over the years this hope intensified that God would send a special gift of the divine presence. The Gospel of Matthew gives voice to this hope: "Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a child and they will call his name "Immanuel. God with us."

Before we can further explore the meaning of God's Immanuel gift, we have to deal with that one little troubling word in that promise: the "v" word -- "virgin." Clearly, when Isaiah issued his original promise to Ahaz, he used the word "virgin" in the generic sense of a young woman of marriageable age. That was all he meant. Hezekiah was conceived and born in the usual way. But over the centuries, as hope for a Messiah intensified, expectations intensified, too, and people came to expect that the birth of God's anointed would be special, indeed, unique. I confess to you that I have never understood the controversy that swirls around this doctrine. I know that some people claim that Jesus had to be born of a virgin in order to be

the sinless Redeemer of humankind. That claim never made much sense to me. But I have been equally skeptical of the claim that Christ couldn't be born of a woman who had never known a man sexually because doing so would subvert the rules of the universe. Hello! If God brought the universe into being, if God established the rules of the universe, how can we say that God is not allowed to bring one human child into being without sexual intercourse? In truth, virgin births are not so unique. You may have seen a few months ago that scientists documented the fact that a mama shark in captivity birthed a baby shark without a male shark's sexual participation. They say that this is the second time they can document that it has happened in captivity, and they say that it happens in the wild fairly frequently, not only with sharks, but with frogs. Are we saying that sharks and frogs can give birth through immaculate conception but it cannot happen just once in the case of a human being without the laws of the universe being destroyed? In truth, the doctrine of the Virgin Birth was never about biology. It is making a theological point that in instituting the drama of redemption, God took the initiative. In reconciling the world unto Himself, God acted first! When I think of the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, I think of that conversation in the movie *Jurassic Park* where the chaos theorist questions the scientists' belief that they can control the dinosaurs by keeping them all female. A scientist retorts, "Are you saying that a population composed entirely of females will breed?" The chaos theorist answers, "The history of nature is that life breaks through barriers, creatively, sometimes violently, but nature refuses to be contained. Life finds a way." That's all the Virgin Birth doctrine is trying to say: God refuses to be bound by our conceptions of what is possible. In offering us the gift of redemption, God breaks through barriers creatively, sometimes violently – but in attempting to offer us the gift of God's presence, God finds a way!

Whatever your view of the Virgin Birth, I would not have you indifferent about the meaning of the gift of Immanuel. What does it mean to us when God promises that God is with us? Is the notion that "God is with us," nothing more than pious words? God forbid! God does not intend for this to be the case. God has blessed us with an existence that is very good and rich, but that does not alter the fact that life is very hard. It is designed that we will ultimately lose everything and everyone we value. We have been made vulnerable creatures. So what happens when events leave you empty? How do you respond when there is a pain inside you that no drug can touch? What happens when you hurt so badly in your soul that you do not think you can draw your next breath – and you are not even sure that you want to? In such moments God intends for us to open the Immanuel gift and hear the words, "I am with you." In such moments God intends for us to feel the divine light piercing our darkness. God does not intend the divine promise to be just words but a comforting, empowering reality that we experience in the depth of our soul. I think back to a moment ten years ago, the morning after my friend and colleague Tom Green died, and I found myself in a tent in the Nantahala National Forest, full of sadness as I lay in my sleeping bag, wracked by the sorrow of losing a good friend and a better man. In that pre-dawn hour I found myself praying a spontaneous prayer of consolation for Camille and Brent and for all of their family -- and asking spiritual strength for myself. I felt defeated, as if all of my prayers for my friend had come to naught. But amidst my prayer, even as I was intent upon voicing the void within my heart, I simultaneously heard God's strange and illuminating response. I heard no audible voice, but felt a message flash into my brain with the insistence of a lightning bolt. I felt these words form within me: "*Your life is in my hands.*" That was all: "Your life is in my hands."

In that moment the Immanuel gift was not mere words but a spiritual reality within me.

I felt God's peace. *"Your life is in my hands."*

Suddenly, my daughter Clara, then a young child, cried out in her sleep, as she was wont to do, and reflexively I pulled her to me and she nestled quietly against me, comforted.

I realized, *This is what it means to be a human being.*

We cry out into the world's darkness, our hearts seeking reassurance.

Our Divine Parent answers back, "Your life is in my hands. I am with you. Live at peace."

My friends, we are often curious about the wrong things when it comes to spiritual matters.

We read books about the Bible, because that's safer than reading the Bible itself.

We think we are learning more about God because our "head knowledge" about God is increasing, but the genius and truth of God's Word can only be divined by the heart, through the humility and openness of the heart.

Only an open and humble heart can grasp the fact that God identified with us in all of our vulnerability and in all of our mortality.

Only a child-like mind can grasp that God came to us as a dependent creature in the form of a gift, a gift-wrapped baby.

The nature of God is to be a Giver.

We so struggle to remember this basic, wondrous fact that we must come anew to Advent each season to recover this truth.

I hold in my hand a calculator, handy friend for mathematically-challenged students – and adults.

Do you know who invented the first calculator?

His name was Blaise Pascal, and he invented it over three hundred and fifty years ago.

Yet for all of his mathematical genius and intellectual brilliance Pascal sensed that his soul was beset by a great emptiness, and he searched for a sustaining faith relationship with God that might give him meaning.

One day Pascal and friends were riding in a coach whose horses suddenly bolted and ran headlong off a bridge. In a moment worthy of Hollywood, the coach's reins broke just as the carriage was flying into the abyss, and the coach hung for a moment, suspended on the bridge, half on, half off, literally teetering between life and death. Pascal and his friends escaped, but the moment so overwhelmed the sensitive thinker that he fell unconscious and remained so for some time. But a few days later he experienced God's nearness in a way so overpowering that he recorded the moment in a sort of poem entitled "Fire."

"Fire. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,  
not of the philosophers and of the learned.

Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace. . . .

Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy. . . . Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ. . . ."

Here is the testimony of one who had truly experienced the Immanuel gift.

God's love was no longer a concept for this brilliant man. It had ceased to be words.

He had opened his being to the Immanuel gift and God was with him, intensely present.

He knew God's reality as a true fire of presence, a vibrancy of love.

Do you and I only regard God's love as a mere concept,

or do we pull this gift into the depth of our being and realize that God is truly with us, that God in God's very being, in God's very nature, is a Giver – and seeks to give to us?

You see rocks scattered around the manger on the stage.

Most, I confess, are just regular old Charlotte rocks,

but this one, this one is a gen-u-ine rock from the Sea of Galilee,

from near the old synagogue by the lake where Jesus actually walked.  
Jesus' feet could have walked upon this rock.  
I keep this rock because it reminds me, Jesus really did come to earth.  
Jesus really did walk on rocks just like this one.  
In fact, not far from where I picked this rock Jesus really one day rose amidst a congregation  
and read, "Behold, the blind see, the lame walk, the poor have good news preached to them."  
Then, with every eye in the place upon him, he said, "Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."  
He was telling them, "God is with you. The Immanuel gift has come."  
One wonders that day how many of them understood the gift that was being given them.  
One wonders how many of us truly understand that gift even now.

I hold in my hand a box of chocolate chip cookies,  
the kind I spend my December delivering to our visitors  
and to every single one of our homebound members.  
I was on such a mission a few days ago, walking to the house of a visitor,  
when I passed a young Hispanic man who was handling a leaf blower.  
He saw the box of cookies in my hand, then grinned at me and asked, "For me?"  
and I grinned and shook my head and walked on to my appointed house.  
But as I returned to my car, I had an inspired thought.  
I grabbed a box of cookies, walked back up the road, finding the young man still working his leaf blower, his  
back to me, so I took him completely by surprise as I tapped him on the shoulder.  
He turned, giving me an astonished look as I put a box of cookies in his hand and said  
the only two words in Spanish I know besides "taco" and "burrito": "Feliz Navidad."  
Then I walked away, knowing that though he will never know my name,  
he will not soon forget the day when some stranger in a suit  
handed him a gift he did not expect and wished him "Merry Christmas."  
Doubtless he will open the gift.  
So, too, the giving God offers us gifts of hope, peace, joy and love.  
Will we open them in faith?  
Will we feel the warmth of God's presence within us like a fire?  
Will we know God's Immanuel gift as a transforming reality and not just words?  
The giving God offers us the gift of His Presence this Christmas.  
And this shall be a sign to you:  
you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.  
Feliz Navidad. Merry Christmas.  
Come, let us adore Him.

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The Fourth Sunday of Advent