

## Immanuel

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Rich Nathan

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The First Christmas Carols (Advent 2007)

Matthew 1:23

Imagine you were born in a prison. Your mother was convicted of selling drugs and sent to prison while she was pregnant with you. So you were born in prison. And you grow up in the prison never having seen the outside world. Now, the prison was beside an ocean and every once in a while, if the breeze was right, you could smell the ocean air blowing through the prison. And when the prison was silent at night, maybe you could even occasionally hear the ocean waves crashing against the shore. But you've never seen the ocean or the beach.

Then you start receiving letters with pictures of the beach. There are happy people sailing in sailboats and swimming in the ocean. There are other people on the beach sunning themselves and playing. And these letters create in you a longing – one day, you say, if I could just walk on that beach for one day in my life, I would be happy.

But you are in prison. And there is no way for you to ever walk on that beach. So you put up the pictures that you received of the beach over the years all around your prison cell.

And then something strange happens. You hear something. There is a noise that comes from outside the prison walls. It starts off sounding like a faint scraping. You have to listen hard to make sure your ears aren't playing tricks on you. Then it becomes louder and louder and you know something is happening. Suddenly a hole the size of your hand appears in the wall and you realize that someone has drilled through the wall. And more and more material comes out from the wall; the hole gets bigger and bigger and there on the other side of the wall you see this really kind faced man smiling at you saying, "Come on out. I want to show you something."

Though you are afraid, you take the man's hand and crawl through the hole. And he walks you down to the beach. He says, "Take off your shoes. Feel the sand on your feet. Look at the ocean. Come on, let's walk along the shores together and feel the ocean splashing over your ankles. Listen to the sea gulls. Smell the sea air. Enjoy this time you have on the beach."

Now, the parallel between this little story and the Christmas story is pretty clear. The Bible says in many places that we, as a result of the sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve, we are all born into this terrible situation called sin as if we were all born in prison. We are all born into this broken world surrounded by broken

people with great limits placed on our capacity to experience joy. But into the prison of our sin and darkness, God sent promises to our spiritual ancestors in the Old Testament, promises of the possibility of escape from prison.

### **Hebrews 1:1-2**

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.

God speaks to people in various ways as the writer of Hebrews puts it. He spoke to people through prophets. God speaks to people about himself through creation. God gives us inklings of what's on the other side of the wall. And the Old Testament encourages us to wait and listen to the sound of the tunneling through the prison wall. And then one day, God himself came down in the form of a baby named Jesus Christ. God himself from his side broke through the prison wall and invites us into the freedom and joy of a new world – the world of relationship with himself. God's new world includes a new family called the Christian church. God's new world that also includes the gift of eternal life in God's kingdom.

And all of these wonderful things are the doing of God. We couldn't break out of prison on our own. God did it all from his side. This Christmas Eve I would like to talk about who this God is who entered the prison of our world on Christmas in order to set us free. I've called this Christmas Eve talk "Immanuel." Let's pray.

### **Matthew 1:23**

"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

Matthew is quoting a 700-year-old prophecy from the prophet Isaiah about a virgin-born Messiah who would bring God to us. This virgin-born Messiah would have as one of his names, Immanuel, which is Hebrew for "God with us."

### **Immanuel = God with us**

Is there any phrase in the entire world that can bring more hope and comfort from God than this little phrase, "God with us."

I have a little granddaughter, who I dearly love, named Naomi. She is five years old. Now Naomi often sleeps over at our house. We have a bedroom upstairs for her and then Marlene and I sleep downstairs in our room. But invariably, Naomi comes downstairs at around 1:30 in the morning to get her Grandmother Marlene. Marlene then goes upstairs with her and they sleep together in the big upstairs bed. Well, a couple of weeks ago I was talking to Naomi in the morning. I said, "Naomi, you know when you take Grandma to go upstairs with you, that

means that I am all alone and Grandpa gets lonely at night sleeping by myself because Grandma isn't there." My five-year old granddaughter looked at me and said, "Grandpa, don't worry; you're not alone. Jesus is with you."

Several dozen times in the Bible God speaks to different people and says, "Don't worry. You are not alone; Jesus is with you. Don't worry. I am with you. I will be your protector. I will be your provider."

In the book of Joshua, Joshua was facing this mammoth challenge that was too big for him. God had assigned him the task of leading the children of Israel in taking possession of the Promised Land, a land that was filled with hostile tribes, many of whom had weapons that were much superior to the weapons of Israel. But God gave Joshua this promise in Joshua 1:5,

**Joshua 1:5**

No one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.

And then in the book of Isaiah, God speaks through the prophet Isaiah to a people who were in captivity in Babylon. First the prophet lists all of the great attributes of God – how enormous God is; how wise he is; how competent he is; nothing and no one defeats God. And having communicated who God is, God speaks to the people in captivity and says in Isaiah 41:10,

**Isaiah 41:10**

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

Do you recognize who it is who is with you? If you do, you will see that you have no reason this Christmas to be anxious, fearful, or hopeless about the future. God the amazing God, who is very smart, who can figure out the solution to any problem, God who is incredibly generous, God the God who loves you and watches over you is with you.

And friend, it is a decision of faith to be able to believe that God is with you especially when you are going through a dark time when you can't feel the presence of God and you wonder where his protection and provision has gone. It is a decision of faith to trust in the word of God and say, "I am not alone; God is with me."

King David made that choice of faith in the most famous Psalm, Psalm 23, when he said,

**Psalm 23:4**

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

Are any of you this evening walking through the valley of the shadow of death – facing a major operation, or cancer treatment, or unemployment; or maybe this is your first Christmas apart from a loved one who died this past year and this is your first Christmas without them. Maybe this Christmas is filled with family tensions or you are facing a mountain of debt. David said, “Even when I am walking in the darkest valley, I don’t have to be anxious, fearful, or hopeless about the future because you, God, are with me.”

You know, the Bible says that God is with us even in death, not just in the valley of the shadow of death, but God is with his people even when they die. Jesus said to a thief who was crucified next to Jesus on a cross, a thief who turned to Jesus at the last moment for salvation; our Lord said to him in Luke 23:43 these words:

**Luke 23:43**

Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

In Philippians 1:21-23 we read this:

**Philippians 1:21-23**

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. 22 If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! 23 I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far;

Wouldn’t you like to have the security and confidence to know that nothing can happen in life or in death that will ever separate you from Jesus. He promises to be Immanuel, God with us. Do you take comfort from that, friend? Do you take encouragement that no matter what you go through, Jesus is with you? You know this promise of Jesus’ presence is conditioned upon us yielding our lives to him in faith. Have you ever said, “Jesus, I give you my whole life, please never leave me.”

Jesus is not only God with us, but the babe born in Bethlehem on Christmas was God for us. Let me tell you a story. There was a young boy born in the 1890’s to a very pious Roman Catholic family who lived in Poland. The boy’s name was Maximilian Kolbe. The boy grew up to be a priest and taught at a Roman Catholic Seminary in the 1920’s. He then went to Japan with four other priests in 1930 to spread the gospel among the Japanese. When he arrived, he knew no Japanese and he was absolutely penniless. But within a month he was printing a Japanese version of a Roman Catholic magazine.

Maximilian Kolbe also founded a monastery in Japan. He went to India and founded another monastery. Poor health brought him back to Poland. After the Nazi Invasion, he along with some other priests, took care of 3000 Polish Refugees, 2/3's of whom were Jewish. Because of his work in protecting refugees, the Nazis arrested Maximilian Kolbe. He was sent to the Auschwitz Concentration Camp. He was assigned to a special work group staffed by priests and supervised by especially vicious and abusive guards.

In July 1941 there was an escape from the camp. Camp protocol, which was designed to make the prisoners guard each other, required that 10 men be starved to death in order to deter further escape attempts. One of the men selected for death by starvation was a married man. He cried out and began weeping for his family. He said, "I can't die. I've got a wife and children." Maximilian Kolbe, this Catholic priest, stepped forward and said, "I will die in this man's place." So he, along with nine other men, was locked in a prison cell. During the time in the cell, he led the men in hymns of praise and prayers to God. After three weeks of dehydration and starvation, only Kolbe and three others were alive. The singing of hymns to God was so upsetting to the Nazis that they were injected with poison and killed.

Pope John Paul II named Maximilian Kolbe the Patron Saint of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. And Maximilian Kolbe became the Patron Saint for people in prison, for political prisoners, drug addicts, and the pro-life movement. He gave his life to rescue another.

This is what Jesus Christ, who is God for us, did when he died in our place on the cross. You see, the Bible teaches that each of us are sinners. We continually break God's commandments. Everyone of us does. We don't love God the way we should; and, we don't love people the way we should. The Bible teaches that sin merits punishment. God said that he would punish sin and that the punishment would mean death for sinners. So, if God went back on that, he would no longer be righteous or just. God's way of forgiving us is to deal with sin, to give sin the punishment it deserves.

And that's what he did in Christ on the cross. God forgives my sin and your sins through the death of Christ as our substitute. Just like Father Maximilian Kolbe died instead of that condemned married man, you and I can go free before God because Christ died in our place.

There is a teaching in the Old Testament about what is called a scapegoat. And as described way back in the Old Testament book of Leviticus, the High Priest took a goat and put his hand upon it symbolically transferring Israel's sins to that goat. And then the goat was driven away into the wilderness never to be seen again. This is what God does with your sins and my sins. He places them upon Jesus and in so doing he separates everyone who looks to Jesus Christ and his

sacrificial death for forgiveness. We go free because Christ is our substitute and sin-bearer. Christ is our scapegoat. We are invited to place our sins upon him.

Do you believe this, this Christmas Eve? Have you asked Christ to be your substitute and your sin-bearer?

Jesus is God with us. Jesus is God for us. Jesus is God over us.

How many of you have seen *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*? There is a scene in Talladega Nights where Will Ferrell is blessing the family's dinner. He keeps praying to "Baby Jesus." His wife finally stops him and says, "Look, Jesus grew up! You don't have to keep praying to Baby Jesus." But Ricky Bobby says, "I like the Christmas Jesus best." So he prays:

*Dear little Baby Jesus, whose sittin' in his crib watching Baby Einstein videos, learning about shapes and colors. I would like to thank you for bringing me and my momma together, also that my kids no longer sound like gang-bangers..."*

He goes on to thank Baby Jesus for his "smokin' hot wife." Certainly, the way we pray and the way we live is largely determined by the image of God that we have. Ricky Bobby's wife was right. Baby Jesus did grow up.

And if we were to see Jesus today, we would not see him as a little baby lying in a manger in the state of his humble coming into the world. Instead, we would see Jesus as the prophet Isaiah saw him and as the apostle John saw him, enthroned in his glory as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. This Jesus rules over gays and straights. He rules over men and women, young and old, rich and poor, black and white, educated and uneducated, healthy and sick, Republicans and Democrats, married and singles, Christians and non-Christians, angels and demons, and the living and the dead. To have a relationship with the Jesus this Christmas, means that you have God over you; not just God for you, or God with you, but that you've asked God to be over you.

I talk with so many folks who say, "I've accepted Jesus as my Savior," but the Bible asks the question, "Has Jesus become your Lord?" Can you, friends, this Christmas Eve honestly say before God that I am allowing Jesus Christ to rule over my life; I've asked Jesus to be Lord and Ruler over all my relationships; I've asked Jesus to be Lord and Ruler over my family, if you're married, over my marriage. I've asked Jesus to be Lord and Ruler over my sexuality; over my money; over my career; my schooling, my attitudes, my speech. Friend, have you ever asked Jesus to be Lord and Ruler over your life? That's who he is. He is not now just Baby Jesus lying in a manger watching Baby Einstein videos as Ricky Bobby put it. He is seated on a throne and he's been given all authority to rule. He is seated on a throne. And this Jesus is the one who will judge you and me. Have you asked him to be Lord of your life?

As we look around the world this Christmas Eve; there are so many different problems. We've had a tragic series of violent episodes over the last month or so of shooting in a mall in Omaha, Nebraska; a shooting at a church and mission center; continued violence in the Middle East in Iraq and Afghanistan. There was a terrible bombing in a mosque in Palestine. There are so many people who are unhappy and are at odds with family members. This Christmas Eve others are struggling with addictions and habits too strong for them to break. It is not just that there are problems out there in the world, there are problems inside each of us. There is no one who would want the secret thoughts of their hearts projected up on a screen for the world to see. Nobody wants our secret ambitions, our secret lives, our lusts, our desires projected up on a screen.

What is it that we need to have happen to us in order to change? What has to happen to this world for the world to be changed? Jesus said we need to get a new life. In John 3:3 Jesus spoke to a Jewish rabbi and said this:

**John 3:3**

Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again."

According to Jesus the only answer for dealing with the sin inside of us is to be remade. We need to get a new life. Jesus, who is radical, says we need to be totally made over if we are ever to enjoy life with God. See, if human beings were a house Jesus would be saying, "You don't just need a new paint job, a little touch up, some light sanding on the outside and a fresh coat of paint. You just don't need a little improvement." Jesus is saying that if you were a house, the house has to be torn down to the ground and completely rebuilt.

Or to use a different picture, if we were talking about medical treatments, Jesus is saying that you don't need a little bit of Botox for the wrinkles on your face. You don't just need a facial or liposuction. You need a triple-organ-transplant – heart, lungs, and liver.

If you were a car, you don't just need new floor mats. The car needs to be crushed in a car-crusher. You need a whole new car.

Sin doesn't get out of a person's soul by surface change. Sin gets out of a person's soul when Christ comes in to your heart. He reigns and rules from the inside of you. Unfortunately, here is what we read in John 1:11,

**John 1:11**

He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.

Christ came to his own people, to his own nation, to his own community, to his own family. But sadly his own didn't receive him when he was born or today 20 centuries later.

How many of you this Christmas would say that you have been around Christ. That you have been around the truth. That you have been near the truth in your own home. It has been presented to you through your own parents. It has come to you in Sunday School or by growing up in church, and through Christian friends and things you have heard. You have been around the truth and near the truth, yet you have not received it, taken it in, and followed it. The Bible says Jesus came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Maybe you are in the position of not yet receiving Christ this Christmas Eve.

When I read that he came to the world, but it didn't receive or recognize him, it reminds me of soldiers coming back from fighting a war on behalf of our country. I got a very poignant letter recently from a Viet Nam vet who did a tour of duty in Viet Nam. The Vietnam vet who put himself in the line of fire, decided to do something for his country, and then came home. Not only was there no welcoming parade like other veterans in history had received, not only were there not people waiting for him and cheering his arrival, but when the vet came home he had kids his own age who cursed him, who spit at him, who called him a baby-killer. Kids his own age that lied their way out of service to their country, pretended they had bad knees, fled to Canada or Sweden, and yet considered themselves superior to him. He said, "I did my duty; I did what I was supposed to do for my country and I wasn't recognized or received; instead, I was rejected and spit at."

That is what happened to Jesus, the Creator, and the Son who stepped off the throne in heaven to come down to us. No welcome. No parade. Why should we follow you? Who are you? Why should we listen to you? Like the Viet Nam vets. He was also spit upon. Among his many trials, we read this in Mark 10:32-34,

**Mark 10:32-34**

They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. 33 "We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, 34 who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise."

If you've ever been rejected, or cursed, or spit on, know this happened also to the Son of God. He came to his own people, and his own did not receive him.



But there were some who received him.

**John 1:12**

Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—

Compare the Viet Nam vet's reception with the first Gulf War. I remember when the men and women returned from the Gulf War, and I remember those shouts from wives and little children, babies being held by the wives and husbands. Old men, dads, gray-haired moms, lining up on the docks as the ships were coming in with their sons, daughters, husbands and wives, daddies and mommies. I remember watching family members lining up and straining to see their loved ones coming home. I remember watching those young men and women racing down the gangplank and having family members run into their arms weeping, wives throwing themselves into the arms of their husbands. And in the background they played that patriotic music. I remember watching those scenes on the news after the Gulf War and I just cried and cried. I love welcoming scenes. I love watching people receive loved ones.

John writes, "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." That's why God came down to make us his children.

Not everyone in the world is a child of God. Everyone is a creature of God, but not everyone in the world gets the wonderful title of God's son, or God's daughter. You are not born as a child of God according to the Bible. You must do something to become a child of God. You must do something to be adopted into God's family.

What must you do to be adopted into God's family? You must receive Jesus. And you must receive all of Jesus. You see, a lot of people approach God the way shoppers approach a grocery store. "Well, I'm going to the grocery tonight. I want to make a pizza. Let's see, I'm going to get some frozen pizza dough and tomato sauce and mozzarella cheese. I'll pick up some sausage and pepperoni. I will pick up some hot peppers. I don't really want black olives; I don't like them on my pizza. I will pick up some mushrooms." A lot of people approach Christ the way shoppers approach a grocery store. We'll take some things that we like about Christ and put them in our grocery cart and leave other things behind.

But you can't do that with Christ. You can't pick and choose with Christ. Because coming into a relationship with Christ is more like getting married than visiting a grocery store. When you get married, you take everything that the other person is – everything. You join your life with this other person entirely. You are joined to their finances. You are joined to them physically and emotionally. You are joined to this other person's good moments and their bad moments. When a person receives Christ into their life, they are saying, "I am going to embrace all

of Christ as a husband and wife would embrace each other entirely in their marriage.”

And so we must receive Christ not only as God with us, but also as God for us, our substitute, and our sin-bearer. Not only as God for us, but God over us as our Ruler and Lord. The one who gets to call the shots over all of our life. And not only is God over us, but God in us changing us, transforming us from the inside, giving us an entirely new life. This Christmas, I encourage you: Put your trust in Christ and receive him – all of him - into your life. Let’s pray.