

# IMMANUEL: GOD WITH US

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## **Joseph Accepts Jesus as His Son**

<sup>18</sup> This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

<sup>20</sup> But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

<sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

<sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. <sup>25</sup> But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

The Word became flesh and blood,  
and moved into the neighborhood.  
We saw the glory with our own eyes,  
the one-of-a-kind glory,  
like Father, like Son,  
Generous inside and out,  
true from start to finish.

*John 1:14*

The birth story of Jesus has all the makings of blockbuster movie.

Raw human emotion, unexplainable, supernatural occurrences...dreams and angels, a virgin conception, mystery- the fulfillment of ancient prophecy and surprises galore, full blown challenges to the humdrum, normal, acceptable order of life and experience – angels choirs in the sky, a stunning, moving star and later visitors from afar. And to add to the intrigue, every player holds a little piece of the puzzle and contributes unknowingly to the unfolding drama which is being choreographed by God Himself.

One thing about this blockbuster movie is different though: it's not based on fantasy which stretches our imagination for the sake of entertainment : it's real!! There is nothing more real than being pregnant when you weren't expecting it! Just being pregnant faces you up with a reality that has huge consequences whichever way you look at it or in whatever circumstances it happens. A child changes life forever after, whether wanted or unwanted.

Mary is found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit, while she was betrothed to Joseph ie basically married though the union is not consummated. The only way out of that is divorce. Joseph while being an honourable man and faithful to the law, did not want to expose her to public disgrace, so decided to do it quietly.

It has become very clear to me this year in 2014 that culturally this was a very dangerous thing - for Mary to be pregnant in such a circumstance. This year the terrible treatment of women in closed countries has become far more in our face and when I watched on U tube a young women be stoned by her father for her supposed misdemeanor around marriage, I realized exactly what Jesus was saying when he challenged the men who caught a women in adultery to be the first to cast a stone if they were without sin. This is how women were treated then and it is still true today, 2000 plus years later. It is frighteningly real.

It is just as well therefore that the angel stepped into Joseph's dream and changed his mind.

The angel says some surprising, incredible things:

- Don't be afraid to take Mary home, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.
- <sup>21</sup> She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."
- <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

This child, unexpected and totally surprising, was to change the course of human history and destiny forever.

Our Christian story begins with a baby who is "God with us," and ends with that child, grown, promising that He will always be with us, lo even to the end of human history and eternally. [28:20]

**"God with us" is the image and the reality I want you to take away from here today and into your Christmas celebration, but more importantly into the very fabric of your life and experience and you ongoing relational encounter with Jesus Christ, the Son of God.** Without Jesus, the face of God, coming amongst us as a human baby, revealing the nature of God, and being God with us, how would we know what to believe, nor what God was like?

**Le me provide an Illustration:**

A woman rescued an abandoned, frightened young dog, who had also been abused and half drowned. He desperately needed cleansing and medication for his wounds. But not until she tried to lower him into the warm tub did she realize how terrified he was of water because his abusers had tried to kill him that way. He screamed and fought, his whole body a solid mass of fear. Realising there was only one way to reach him through his panic, she stripped to her underwear and got into the water with him. Along with all the fleas, dirt and blood she held him, stroking him gently, quietly talking to him, until he began to relax. Then the deep cleansing could begin.

This story is a real parallel of the incarnation and the way God comes to us and deals with our fear, our wounds and hardened defenses, our estrangement from love and from our Creator, our need to know and have meaning. In our ignorance we would push God away out there and create of him something fantastical, a dream god of our own imagination who is either like a repressive punisher or a fairy with a magic wand if only I can get the formula right, or just deny that any god exists.

Left to ourselves this is a recipe for the multiplication of evil and barbarism.

One of the curious features of the Christian faith is what theologians call “the scandal of particularity.” I think Miranda Hart, the British comedian, would have something to say about this phrase...the sound of those words...she would look at the camera and go --the scandal of particularity, whoo, the scandal of particularity, listen to how that sounds.

Scandal = disgrace, outrage, repulsive to normal sensibility and rational thought, mindbogglingly incomprehensible.

Particularity = peculiarity, exactitude, specificity.

Rather than put forth a general philosophy of religious truth or a set of axioms the Christian faith tells a story of a God who comes to humankind particularly, in a very precise way, not in anyway vague and distant. He elects one people group to carry the promise. One woman Mary is chosen to bear the Christ child. Jesus- God in flesh is the incarnate One. He comes, as a human being - He gets down in amongst us with our story, in our neighbourhood and shares our dirt and fleas. It is very particular, specific, precise.

C. S. Lewis tells us that God’s peculiar way of choosing particular people for his purposes is an offense to our modern sensibilities.

“To be quite frank, we do not at all like the idea of a “chosen people.” Democrats by birth and education, we should prefer to think that all nations and individuals start level in the search for God, or even that all religions are equally true. It must be admitted at once that Christianity makes no concessions to this point of view. It does not tell of a human search for God at all, but of something done by God for, to, and about Man. And the way in which it is done is selective, undemocratic, to the highest degree. After the knowledge of God had been universally lost or obscured, one man from the whole earth (Abraham) is picked out. He is separated (miserably enough, we may suppose) from his natural surroundings, sent into a strange country, and made the ancestor of a nation who are to carry the knowledge of the true God. Within this nation

there is further selection: some die in the desert, some remain behind in Babylon. There is further selection still. The process grows narrower and narrower, sharpens at last into one small bright point like the head of a spear. It is a Jewish girl at her prayers. All humanity (so far as concerns its redemption) has narrowed to that." (From *Miracles*, Chapter 14)

What do we do with a God of love, who through His messenger Jesus, declares that a life of love is the way of God, and evidences this through real loving, healing, forgiving, restoring spiritual activity on the planet?

It's a scandal because it asks us to make a very specific choice. To throw in our lot with a God who reveals Godself in the person and face of Jesus Christ - as a baby, then as a man who is crucified and resurrected. In choosing to follow Christ, all other gods and religious systems are excluded. We cannot generalise and say that all paths somehow lead to God. We cannot accept a theism that replaces Christocentric language with 'God language' in which Jesus becomes an example of yet another noble life, a good teacher, an option among options and the Gospel one of general love based on the teaching of Jesus.

The Old and New Testaments are what they are: Very Particular. Jesus is the Son of God, the I AM and He is the way, the truth and the life. He is, as the earliest believers powerfully taught post-resurrection, God incarnate.

None of the "I am" claims of Jesus is more challenging than this: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." The claim is the most exclusive claim of Jesus, but it has within it all the aspects of his other claims. Jesus is the STAR, the focus all points to HIM -the baby in the manger, the scandal of particularity in whom God declares his uniqueness among the faiths of all ages.

Who we think Jesus is and for what purpose he came determines our understanding of salvation and discipleship and what we believe Jesus can do for persons and for society gives shape to our life. It is pivotal in thinking about mission and evangelism and will determine the confidence we have in the gospel.

But frankly it will mean nothing unless I know Jesus in the same particular, specific manner. It will not be good enough to give intellectual assent or borrow the faith of others or the church, I must respond to the particular call of Jesus to follow Him and to partner with Him in the world.

And why would I do this? Because the scandal of particularity applies to us too.

He particularises us. Me.

Helen, I have called you by name, you are mine.

Across the universe he calls my name. think about how amazing that is. I am not just a digit, a number in amongst the 10 billion other humans, I am Helen. You are....

There is a particularity about you that God dignifies with a name, with a blessing, with a

purpose. Before you were born I knew you. I designed your frame and in the hidden depths of your mother's womb I created you. You are the focus of my love.

And in Christ we become even more. I am no more special than anyone else, but in Christ I am an individual with a capacity to know Jesus intimately. We are one. In Christ I live and move and have a *raison d'être*.

Is there a temptation to think this life is really futile? We cannot possibly be so important to God. After all there are a billion other of us. Are we not just in a matrix or a hunger game, where someone else controls us and manipulates us in a cruel manner for their entertainment? This is the life described in those movies – where some are privileged and the rest work it out as pawns, puppets, numbers, expendable items of no intrinsic value.

But friends this is not the message of the Christian faith, nor of Christmas.

The true message is caught up in this phrase the 'scandal of particularity' - that the God of the universes chooses this lonely blue planet, this particular people, this one woman and comes amongst us in the form of a baby to save **us** and dignify us and honour us as those He has created in His image.

Jesus is the real star.

He became poor that we might become rich. God left the universe of his glory and came to be with us. To encounter us. He emptied himself taking on our nature and becoming a servant even unto death.

That's exactly what God does as He enters into our aloneness and takes our shame and grief, he bears it with us. He comes into the anger and is with us in it. He comes into despair and disgust and it doesn't put him off. He gets amongst the dilemmas of our world and its condition, lost without a Saviour.

We get joined to God in Christ Jesus and that movement of God into our lives is what frees us to move into the lives of others to bring the reconciliation of God with us, on our side, in amongst it.

Christmas is a time to be reminded and an opportunity to reflect again on our relationship to the Christ child. How will you receive Jesus as Immanuel this Christmas? How will you encounter Him, in your home, your world, your neighbourhood, God with you. He's right here, in this place, knowable, relational, lover, friend, partner in the world.