

# Share the Surprise

## Matthew 1:18-25

One of the things I look forward to each Christmas, and I look forward to it again this year, is when the children tell the story of Christmas. It's one of my favourite parts. Over the years, I've managed, with permission, to collect some of the ways that children have told the story, and I'd like to share one with you now, from a young lady who was I think in about Year 1 or 2. It's called "Mary's Christmas".

On a hot day, Mary saw a boy. It was all white. She thought it was an angel. "But it can't be," she said. "It is!" said the angel. "Wow," said Mary. The angel said to Mary, "You will have a baby, named God. And go and tell Joseph."

That's only part of her story. Isn't it lovely how we can tell the story from whatever age that we learn it, and it comes into our hearts — it's certainly the story that children often tell. What about our stories?

This morning I am going to try to honour a young boy in telling something of his story, and more particularly the story of his family around Christmas time. But before we do that, let's pray.

Loving God, you send your Son Jesus to come amongst us, full of grace and truth, bringing light into a dark world. Open our hearts and minds to receive Jesus for us, Jesus who comes to save; Immanuel, who is God with us. Amen.



The story that I am going to share is troubling, and as I say I want to do this in a way that honours this boy and his family, and I trust I can do that. Because this Sunday, his story comes back to me when I hear the story of the angel coming and announcing the birth of Jesus, and the names that he will receive — Jesus, which means a Saviour, God comes to save; and Immanuel, God with us. And as Lutheran Christians, I think, it's a special part of our heritage, this "God with us" as we know it through baptism.

I thank God for a young boy who knew this, whose name was Eric. I'm going to share something of his story. I never met Eric himself, but I came to know his Mum, Dad, and his sister quite well. Had he still been alive today, Eric would have been about 30 years of age. His is a tragic story, actually, and a tragic story for his family; and if it brings up memories for any of you, I do apologise in advance.

Eric finished his first year at school, and he got off the school bus in a hurry to get home to whatever it is that you look forward to at the end of your first year at school. As he crossed the road, though, he didn't look; and that was the end of Eric's life on this earth — but not the end of his story, or God's story for him. I think I am right in saying that, where we lived at this time, this tragic, grief-filled death was the reason that they put those 40 km/hr signs on school buses.

Eric's family were members of the congregation where I was the pastor, having come to this parish about five years after Eric's death. And as grief is, especially around the time of Advent and Christmas, it really hits hard; and this family knew the difficulty of that journey.

One time I was blessed, while visiting and talking with the family, that Eric's Mum and Dad decided that they would like to donate some pew Bibles in remembrance of Eric, because of the promises of God for him and for them. So I think I'm likely to always associate this time of getting close to Christmas, and as I hear the announcement of Jesus — the name: God saves; and Immanuel: God is with us — I'll always associate that with the name Eric, too.

In the story that I told at the beginning, this was the picture that accompanied the announcement of God — “the baby's going to be called God” — so what's in this name, and let's see if we can unpack that.

I sent an email, hopefully an encouraging one, to Eric's family just before we were going to dedicate their donated Bibles in church. For that special occasion, a muso friend had composed a song called *The Day the Angels Came*. In writing my email, I bumbled and I fumbled, and I had no idea what might be helpful or meaningful to say. I felt totally inadequate. In the end, I just said it was wonderful that, on the day when we remembered the angel coming to announce the promise of the coming birth of God, Jesus, Immanuel... on this day we also remembered the day the angel came to call Eric home to eternal life with God. I wrote, “My prayers are with you as a family today on the anniversary of the day the angels came.” And I received an unexpected reply from Eric's dad:

“Thanks, Neville. Isn't it great that God sends messages like yours to us at just the right time. This has been happening for 5 years now. But we've only just realised it. Probably it's been happening all the time but we missed them.”

Grief does that. Grief and hurt; relationship breakdown, grudges, selfishness, the busyness, the hardness of it all, many things in life can take us and block our ears and hearts to the promise. We're so consumed by things that we miss the word, miss the promise, miss the hope. Miss the name of God who comes for us.

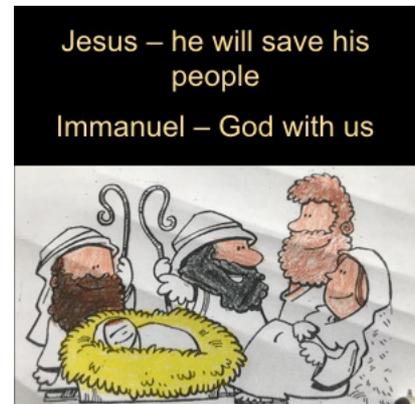
With two more sleeps till Christmas Eve, the fourth Sunday of Advent is a clarion call to hear God *for* us and for the world, and to hear the hope he has for us and for the world in the one who comes; whose name is Jesus, who comes to save you and me; Immanuel, God is with ... us.

Eric's dad came to cherish the many messages of encouragement and hope as he went back through those received over the years since Eric's death. He wanted others to know that there is hope, and that God brings it for the whole world; that God comes for the world and every person, old and young, in it.

Joseph received the promise after he, too, was so caught up in the worry of what was happening, that he almost missed it, too. I can only imagine what was going through his busy mind at the time.

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. 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.

Good intentions, maybe Joseph; but you are missing the point — he didn't see what God was promising. Then Matthew continues:



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. 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.”

All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him “Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

This Advent... this Christmas... don't miss the promise. Whatever life is bringing, even when death is threatening, don't miss the promise that Jesus brings this Christmas for you. Whoever you are with this Christmas, don't miss the opportunity to share and to live the hope you have because of the promise. When the angel announced to Mary that she would have a child, this is how Luke recorded it:

“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Although Mary too was perplexed by the announcement, the angel went on: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.”

And now Mary's response, and I think it's one of the most beautiful responses we could hear. Mary simply says:

“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Let it be as God promises. And it's no small wonder that, as Luke records, after the birth of Jesus, Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart.

That's the way to receive and hold dear the promise for you of the one whose name is Jesus because he saves; Immanuel, God who comes for you. God who knows you by name and promises that no one and nothing will snatch you from his hands and from his life.

Hearing the promise, and receiving the hope in child-like faith. That's how we live, and I reckon that's how we give Christmas.

I think that Eric's dad came to grow in the promises of God even through the grief he faced. And in sharing the journey, so did I grow in learning from him. I pray that as you hear today the name Jesus, the name Immanuel; that you will know that *your* name is written in the Book of Life along with Eric's, and that you have life to give. Hear and give the promise of life. And be ready for the great surprise, as God increases his faith in you.

I cherish the copies of my correspondence with Eric's dad from those years ago.

I finished my part of the email conversation simply with these words: “Thank you for your wonderful generosity in giving us God's Word of promise in the Bibles you donate in the memory of Eric. The Lord be with you all this day and forevermore with his very best love.”

And Eric's dad replied: “He's here. God's here, I know, even though this is hard. God, Immanuel is here with us.”

What's in a name? A person! God for you. God with us!

Amen.