

## “The Perfect Gift: Jesus, the Immanuel”

### **Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25**

Graphic: gift, Immanuel, sleeping bag, baby

Key Verses: 1:21-22 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”

Theme: Jesus is the sign that God truly wants to move in to our lives, get to know us better, and repair our broken relationships. Unwrap this Perfect Gift of God with us, and allow it to transform your life again today as you make room for Him.

### **1) Introduction**

- a) Third Sunday in Advent already!!!!
- b) How many families represented here today, by a show of hands raised high, get to Christmas morning and do the Rip and Tear method on presents? By that, I mean, you all come to the tree, divvy up the presents, and just shred the paper as fast as possible, all at once, all just craziness, and flying wrapping paper. And when it’s all over in like 39 seconds, you have toys and boxes mixed with wrapping paper and candy canes and people...
- c) I always thought that would be fun as a kid...my parents never let us do that, like ever! It was always one...present...at...a...time ...take...us...all...morning. Get the socks first and the sweater that Grandma made that I’ll never wear in public...
- d) And my Dad was the worst, right? He’d get his little jackknife out of his faded jeans pocket and slowly...cut...each...piece...of...tape...and then someday get to the box and cut each strip of packing tape...and then finally get to the good stuff!
- e) As an adult, I’ve learned to really appreciate taking our time on Christmas morning...nowhere to go...let’s enjoy each other and the gifts.
- f) So far, in this Advent gift-opening during worship, we’ve unwrapped two sides of The Perfect Gift from God, Jesus. And we’ve done that in a way that seems slow and reflective, but we’ve unwrapped two of the most incredible and life-transforming ways that Jesus interacts with us...
- g) First, we unwrapped Jesus the Word of God. And you’ll remember that in Jesus, God gave us a living, visible image of Himself. And we know who God is and how God loves us through Jesus. And the way to know Jesus more intimately is to read and reflect on the breathing, active words in Holy

Scripture - words that give us inspiration, instruction, and offer transformation through power of the Holy Spirit.

- h) Last week, we opened Jesus the Messiah...the Anointed One from heaven who leads people into redemption and salvation, through the forgiveness of sin. And that assurance of salvation brings HOPE...
- i) This week, The Perfect Gift is Jesus, Immanuel, God with us. And of all the things I love about Jesus working in our lives, this one has got to be my personal favorite, and I suspect that might be the case for some of you as well.
- j) It has to do with God invading our lives, changing us from the inside-out and staying so close to us that we can feel His breath on our faces...this is God WITH US...
- k) Ten years ago, in a suburb of Rochester, New York, Peter Lovenheim was out walking his dog. He was surprised to see a TV news truck parked down the block. So he wondered what was going on.
- l) As it turned out, a horrible tragedy had occurred. A neighbor three doors down had shot and killed his wife and then himself. Their two young children had escaped, running screaming into the cold night.
- m) Lovenheim was shocked — not only by these violent deaths but by how little true community existed in his suburban neighborhood. He knew the family only slightly, not nearly well enough to sense that trouble was brewing.
- n) Soon a “For Sale” sign appeared in front of the house where the killings had occurred, but everything else remained the same. “A family had vanished, yet the impact on our neighborhood was slight,” writes Lovenheim in a new book called *In the Neighborhood*.
- o) He asked himself, “How could that be? Did I live in a community or just in a house on a street surrounded by people whose lives were entirely separate?”
- p) To find an answer, Lovenheim did what I think any normal American suburb-dweller would do: He asked his neighbors if he could *sleep* at their houses.
- q) Yeah! He requested that he be able to spend the night with them, to get to know them better. Although his daughter was like, “Dad, you’re crazy,” a surprising number of neighbors agreed to his request. And the result, reports

Jennifer Howard in the Washington Post (April 18, 2010), is the book *In the Neighborhood: The Search for Community on an American Street, One Sleepover at a Time*.

- r) And I got to thinking about this story and the story of the birth of Jesus in Matthew. 2,000 years ago, when God took a look at the scene on earth... He saw violence and isolation in every nation, every race and every culture. The human neighborhood that God created was fractured — just as it is now — with people separated from God and alienated from each other.
- s) So God decided to do what no one ever expected a divine being to do: He decided to invade our lives... basically to come and sleepover at our houses... in our lives.
- t) Some of my best memories as a child was having a sleepover at a friend's house or having a buddy come to sleep over on a Friday night. And it's that sense of intimacy that we share when we open our homes to someone else that captures just a small glimpse of the incredible God who truly wants to move in to our lives, get to know us better, and repair our broken relationships.
- u) Who is this Emmanuel, God with us and what happens when he comes into our lives? Let's open our Bibles to Matthew chapter 1, starting in verse 18. Because Jesus came to a couple first... God moved in and never moved out.

## 2) Scripture

### a) Read Matthew 1:18-19

i) Ok, so what do we know?

(1) We know that Mary and Joseph are engaged... and in the Jewish culture, being engaged was the same as being married. However, typically you just don't have a house yet and you did not have any sexual relations yet. In God's eyes, however, you were together forever, until death or legal divorce in the Law of Moses.

(2) Second thing we know is that Mary is pregnant. WE know it's the work of the Holy Spirit... nothing scandalous. She's just pregnant. Obviously, Mary and Joseph were not planning to be parents right then. This was unexpected! Sometimes, when God invades our space – when God works in tangible ways in our lives – it's unexpected and maybe even unwelcome. I suspect, at least on the surface, this pregnancy was unwelcome... until we hear from the angel.

(3) We also know that Joseph is aware of this pregnancy, assuming that he just thinks that Mary was unfaithful and got pregnant. “The plot thickens...dant dant daaaaah”

(4) Last thing Matthew tells us is that Joseph does something contrary to what one would think. See, the penalty for adultery was usually death, under the Law of Moses. By the time we get to Jesus’ day, the penalty was a little less harsh, but still severe and humiliating, depending on the judgment of the rabbi. Joseph though, plans to divorce her QUIETLY – not going to PUNISH her...not going to publicly disgrace her...just going to walk away, however painful that might be for them and the baby.

**b) Read verses 1:20-21**

- i) Joseph had made up his mind, right? This was the way it was going to be for them...
- ii) But sometimes, when we get a decision in our minds, God turns up the heat. If we’re being unfaithful, even when we are totally aware of it, God comes in and changes our minds. God wants Joseph to change his mind...
- iii) Into the neighborhood comes a messenger from God, an angel. This angel tells Joseph to continue to love and care for Mary...get married...have the baby...
- iv) And, this is important, the angel tells him why! Lots of times, God steers us in the right direction when we are faithful to pray and ask for guidance. Sometimes, we don’t know why. Other times, though, God gives us reasons and explains the situation through other people, or through answered prayer.
- v) The word of God came through the voice of an angel, letting Joseph know that Mary’s child is a gift of God and that this baby, to be named Jesus, will save his people from their sins. He will be the Messiah. Jesus will rescue us from everything that can destroy or divide us — in particular, the sins that shatter our relationships with God and neighbor.

**c) Read verses 1:22-23**

- i) Ben read from Isaiah this morning about a promise that came to King Ahaz through the prophet Isaiah. God promised that a child would be born and that the child’s name would be Immanuel.

- ii) And that may have happened for Ahaz...and there may have been a child born in Isaiah's time that was named Immanuel...and it was probably a comforting sign that God was still with them, even through these difficult times.
- iii) However, that child was not Jesus. Isaiah was not talking about Jesus when God made that promise to Ahaz. We know that because the child that was born for Ahaz didn't save the world or reconcile anything.
- iv) But see, Matthew, now writing in this post-Easter time connects the prophecy from Isaiah to the person of Jesus. Matthew saw all that Jesus had done...he witnessed all the things that clearly led him to believe that Jesus was the Messiah - the One who came to finally reconcile the world to God, and KNEW Jesus to be the real Emmanuel, God finally with us – for all time!
- v) Matthew realizes that God isn't simply coming for one isolated sleepover, not just in a visit from an angel to a sleeping man. No, God's moving in with us, permanently. Jesus is Immanuel, God with us, now and forever!
- vi) Forget about making up a bed in the guest bedroom, right? It's time to build a big addition! He's never going away! Amen?

**d) Read verse 1:24-25**

- i) Joseph did exactly what the Lord had asked...he obeyed...he remained pure in his marriage promise to Mary and to God...he named the baby Jesus, like the angel said.
- ii) God had finally come to be with us...

**3) Application**

- a) This is great and awesome news for us...
- b) Yet when God comes into our lives – when we have intimate encounters with God - what does he find? I'm sure God finds some of the same things that Lovenheim uncovered when he packed up his overnight bag and walked over to his neighbor's house for a sleepover.
- c) First, Lovenheim found that a great number of people today are terribly lonely and don't know how to make connections.

- d) Secondly, he found that most people are overscheduled and awfully busy, but still their lives are empty.
- e) It doesn't take any of us very long to agree with Lovenheim. We KNOW that to be the case. We see it in our lives and the lives of our neighbors, if we know them.
- f) We're over-stimulated, under-rested, fragile, broken, hurting people – despite that fact that we put on a good show and have most things under control, most of the time.
- g) But you know what? Living life lonely because we've created these separations, and living life at a break-neck pace while still empty, is not God's plan for us! In fact, it's sinful, because the separation isn't just between you and your neighbors; it also affects your relationship with God.
- h) And being so busy that you miss the moments and the lessons from God is sinful. And it's not about being in church on Sunday morning...it's about a growing and vital relationship with Jesus Christ!
- i) And the reason God sent Jesus as the Word of God was to encourage and inspire and transform you. And the reason God sent Jesus as Messiah was to save you from that sin.
- j) But God doesn't stop there! God sent Jesus as Immanuel so that we would know that He knows what it's like to be human...to be broken...to be lonely...to be separated from our family and friends.
- k) Today, God wants to give you a gift. And while that gift's name may be Jesus and you've given your life to Him, the gift for today is Jesus the Immanuel!
- l) God wants to move in and invade your life!
- m) Many of us will be either staying with someone else in the coming weeks, or having others stay with us...
  - i) When someone moves in, even temporarily for the holidays, we have to prepare the room. Prepare ahead of time a space in your heart and life for Jesus and the things of God – prayer, devotions, Bible reading, service. Get the room ready for him to come at all times. Mary and Joseph had been prepared throughout their lives...Joseph was a righteous man...Mary was pure and chosen by God. And God blessed them.

- ii) When someone comes to stay, you always want to be checking to see what they need. Attend to God's desires and will for you. Ask God what He wants from you. Listen to God and be ready to respond. Do whatever you have to do to please God, stay holy, and do the right thing. Joseph listened to the angel and obeyed. This is exactly what God wants from us!
- iii) Another important thing...when someone comes, you can't do all the work by yourself. Allow someone to help you. In your life, in your journey, that Helper is the Holy Spirit, guiding and directing you, if you invite him. Allow the Holy Spirit to impact and influence your actions, as you prayerfully hear what the Spirit says. If you are having a hard time hearing the Spirit in your life, maybe the separation and the busyness is part of the problem. Mary and Joseph allowed the Spirit to work on their hearts and minds and they made their decisions based on God's leading.
- iv) Finally, we all know that some of the people that come to stay at our houses, or in whose homes we stay, may not be completely reconciled to us or to God. There may have been historical problems, or current ones, that strain our relationships. Maybe it's their fault...maybe it's ours. Allow God to forgive you, forgive the person that has come, and heal your relationships. And this isn't just for the human relationships. Allow Jesus to heal your relationship with God...

#### **4) Conclusion**

- a) You know, we are blessed with several new babies in this congregation. And when a baby comes into our lives, everything changes. Suddenly, we're forced to pay attention to feedings, diaper changes and naps.
- b) The same is true with the coming of Christ, if we allow ourselves to be transformed and refocused. The great challenge of Christmas is to let ourselves slow down and see that yes, in fact, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16).
- c) And the opportunity of Christmas is to become refocused on the fullness of life that comes from following this child. By loving the Lord our God, loving our neighbors as ourselves and going out to make disciples of all nations.
- d) Jesus' great commandment is to love (Matthew 22:34-40). And his great commission is to make disciples, baptize and teach (Matthew 28:16-20). A

sense of peace and purpose can come from following Jesus this way — something we'll never find in jobs, degrees, athletics or hobbies.

- e) Notice also that we can't avoid our neighbors when we focus on Jesus and walk in his way. After all, you can't practice love or discipleship in isolation.
- f) This Perfect Gift of God with us is our connection to God and our connection to other people.
- g) God has invaded our lives, is changing us from the inside out and staying so close to us that we CAN feel His breath on our faces...
- h) I invite you again today to stop, carefully and intentionally undo each piece of tape and each crease...and allow God to come into your life in such an intimate way, that He becomes every part of you this Christmas.
- i) Let's pray...