

## **SIGNS OF IMMANUEL**

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**Isaiah 7:14, 11: 2 – 9**

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In the grocery store checkout line the young woman ahead of you is trying to handle her groceries, her coupons, and a fussy baby. You have the sense that every item in her cart was agonized over. Was it absolutely necessary? Could she afford it? Was there a coupon? How far could she make this food stretch?

You stood behind her and wondered how many other cans and packages she had held in her hand then put back because she couldn't afford more than the necessities in her cart.

After her groceries are totaled and the coupons subtracted, the cashier counts the bills the young woman handed her, and then the cashier announces, "This is not enough money!"

The young woman begins to dig in her purse for money she knows isn't there. The baby senses something is wrong and begins to cry. The cashier says, "You have to take some of this out!" It feels to you like the young woman was barely holding things together to begin with and now this all-too public reminder that she is poor, inadequate, less than.

And you find yourself stepping up and saying to the cashier, "I'll pay the difference." The cashier says, "You don't have to do that. She can just tell me what to put back."

"I don't want her to have to do that," you say. "I'm going to make up the difference."

Then the man behind you in line hands you a twenty dollar bill and says, "Here, I can help out too." And a woman behind him says, "Here's twenty more." And the woman behind her holds up another twenty.

And cash is being passed up as if the checkout line is a casino. And there's enough to pay for all the young woman's groceries. And she is hugging her baby and tears are running down her cheeks, of gratitude, relief, astonishment, that her life could matter like this to a group of strangers.

It wasn't a world-changing thing – this checkout-line-graced moment. On the scale of world issues, it was a small gesture – this little community of generosity that formed in that line.

But it was more than just some people being nice. Something deep and holy and absolutely necessary for the survival of our humanity was at stake in that line. Namely, that we are not just strangers waiting for our turn to pay. Rather, we are kin, beloved sisters and brothers really, sharing in this sometimes hard, often beautiful thing called life.

For it's Advent – the season when, as Isaiah promised, things happen that hint at Immanuel, God with us....

You're in the midst of unpacking the Christmas decorations, and you suddenly feel this sadness. What's it about? Isn't this supposed to be the season of joy? Why this sudden heaviness of heart?

Is it that everything about this season also magnifies the hard things? So that each decoration brings back the longing for the one who has died. Or brings to the surface again all the could-have and should-have-beens. The dreams held dear once, that were not to be.

Or the box of decorations symbolizes innocence lost. Oh, to be able to undo the mistakes, the hurt caused, the guilt still felt.

Or to be able to go back to a Christmas past when things seemed simpler and not so frantic and fragile, and the world not so complicated and cruel.

But as you take things out of the boxes labeled, "X...mas Decorations," you have this spiritual knowing that the sadness is part of it. That you cannot get to the healing and hope of Christmas without also allowing yourself to feel the aching in your soul, the cold chill of regret, and the pain of lingering grief. As you unwrap these decorations that carry so much of your life, you understand that your private sorrow is holy, too.

So with tear-blurry eyes you unpack the boxes, yet you feel held by a Holy Spirit of mercy and love that has seeped into the most vulnerable and tender parts of your life.

For it's Advent – the season when, as the prophet promised, there would be hints of Immanuel, God with us....

It had been one of those days with too much to do and too little time. Everything took longer and didn't go smoothly. All day you felt harried and breathless. So you were with those around you – impatient. You didn't listen well. You spoke too quickly, with an edge of judgment.

And you shouldn't have added to it by listening to the news on the car radio on the way home. For the news this day was relentlessly grim: terrible suicide bombings in Afghanistan; protestors killed in Syria; sexual abuse by coaches and priests; fragile economies in Europe and here; politics of anger and blame.

But in the dark as you drive, your attention is diverted by the holiday lights on homes. Some of the displays are artful and elegant. Some not so much. Yet, each string penetrating the darkness with light. Each display a visual sign of the deepest longings of the human heart.

And as you drive and look at the lights, the stress of the day is left behind, as you feel yourself being pulled into a greater and deeper reality.

"This is not about me," you find yourself thinking. "The world doesn't center around my needs and how my day has gone. People with their own hopes and fears, struggles and dreams, have put these lights up. And God cares about it all and loves each one."

And it feels so good, so liberating, so hope-filled, to be drawn out of yourself by the lights into the greater reality of God's love affair with the whole world.

For it's Advent – the season when, as Isaiah promised, we see hints of it, Immanuel, God with us....

In church you watch the children gather at the front to hear the story: of Zechariah, the priest rendered speechless; of his wife Elizabeth, who is pregnant long after she'd given up hope; of Gabriel, who also delivers an angelic message to a young peasant girl Mary, about the baby she will mother; of Joseph, an unlikely partner in God's daring plan.

It's a story you've heard many times before in the weeks of Advent. But as you watch and listen, it's not just a cute thing or another holiday fantasy. No, something important is at stake, for the children, for you. What you are watching and hearing again is a timeless sacred story, with so much truth to tell about God's eternal will of love.

And you smile at the little ones and the actors. But you also think, "I cannot imagine my life without this."

For it's Advent – the season when, as the prophet promised, we pray and sing it, and allow our lives to be woven into the fabric of the story being told...of Immanuel...God with us....