

Emmanuel: Gift of God's Love

[Isaiah 7:1:2-3, 7:14](#)

[Matthew 1:18-25](#)

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December 18, 2016

Christmas is a time to give gifts that represent our love. In many stories we see how the gift of love comes just at the right time.

Think of the film, "It's a Wonderful Life," based on the short story, "The Greatest Gift," by Philip Van Doren Stern, which he wrote in 1939 and published on a Christmas card in 1945. The film, "It's a Wonderful Life," came out the next year in 1946 and has become an all-time American classic. What do you think is "the greatest gift" in the story? Jimmy Stewart plays George Bailey, a man who likes to help people in his community. He forgoes college and the chance to leave his small town because he feels obligated to take over his father's company. As the manager of the savings and loan, he never really gets to pursue his own dreams. Under George's leadership, the bank stands up against a greedy banker who tries to take over the town, and then there's a crisis: a sum of \$8000 is misplaced, and George is worried he will be held responsible. Even though it isn't his fault, he takes responsibility, and he fears a loss of reputation for his family and his business. Our hero crashes and figures he would be better off dead. On Christmas Eve in despair, he is ready to take his own life, when—along comes an angel—named Clarence. Clarence needs to earn his wings by saving some lost soul. So he shows George an alternative to his despair. Clarence helps George see how much his life has meant to those who love and respect him. He convinces George that he really does have "a wonderful life."

So, in this story, what was "the greatest gift"? I think it was the intervention in George's depression that led him back on course. The angel intervened and stopped George from blaming himself. He reminded him of the love of his family and community, and that love gave him hope. We could say that God intervened—angels are messengers from God, I'd say, even in fictional movies. The idea that people in George's life loved him and that he should love himself came to him as a gift and restored his faith in life, just in the nick of time.

Another favorite Christmas story is "A Christmas Carol," by Charles Dickens, where Ebenezer Scrooge is saved from his own miserly misery. Scrooge had missed many opportunities for love. The Ghost of Christmas Past comes to him in the night and shows him the love he lost when he failed to demonstrate his love to his once fiancée, whom he could never love as much as he loved money. He begins to see how cut off he was from human emotion. Then the Ghost of Christmas Present takes him by the hand and shows him how his own family makes fun of him for being mean and selfish. And the ghost shows him Tiny Tim, the son of his employee, Bob Cratchit. The boy would soon die without proper medical help. And finally the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come forces Scrooge to face his own death and how there would be no mourners at his funeral, and it shows him the Cratchit family in grief after Tiny Tim's death. The intervention of these three spirits in the

night wakes Scrooge to his senses and to a new morality. When he gets up the next morning on Christmas Day, he resolves to be a new person! He actually sets out to make amends and be generous for the first time. The intervention of the spirits stopped him from his stingy, self-centered trajectory. He softened, and he began to experience the joy of giving out of love. I think we could call it divine intervention that gave him truly an about-face!

You might say, well, those are just stories. But that's what we have in life—stories! And the Bible is full of stories. We have one in Isaiah and one in Matthew today.

God came to Isaiah—like an angel perhaps—and gave him words to speak. First God said, "Do not be afraid." The voice of God interrupted the political tension of the day. King Ahaz was worried about building an aqueduct and directing the scarce water into Jerusalem. He feared an invasion from the north that would conquer the city. And Isaiah said, "No, listen, it's going to be okay. 'A young woman will conceive and bear a son.'" Scholars agree this was not a prediction of Mary's pregnancy 700 years later. It was simply a reference to new life that was to come. Authors generally say the "young woman" was probably a woman known in the king's court (Elmer A. Leslie, *Isaiah*, Abingdon Press, 1963, p.). Any pregnancy brings a tremendous sense of hope. Much later, Matthew picked up on this hope—for he would have known the Isaiah scripture—and he compared the hope of the ancient people in Isaiah's time to the hope of the Jewish people under the occupation of Rome in Jesus' time.

The story in Matthew's Gospel is about God's intervention in Joseph's dream, when an angel comes to him to tell him to take Mary as his wife. That needed to happen for Joseph to stay with Mary and raise the boy Jesus.

Now, maybe you noticed something about the wording in this familiar Christmas story. The author—Matthew—quotes Isaiah and says, "A virgin shall conceive." But we read that part of Isaiah today, and it doesn't say "a virgin." It says "a young woman." You see, Matthew found similarity between the intervention of God in the life of the early Israelite people in Isaiah's day and the intervention of God to bring a Messiah in Joseph's day. He transferred the idea of the hope of a newborn baby in the Old Testament story into the hope of a child to be born in the New Testament. But Matthew did not translate the passage accurately. Isaiah didn't say, "A *virgin* shall conceive." Matthew makes Mary a virgin so the story is even more dramatic. It's either a misquotation by accident or perhaps on purpose. It would have been enough just for the angel to suggest that Joseph take Mary (a young woman) as his wife. This is God intervening to make things right. But storytellers often elaborate. It's Matthew's poetic license. The point is that the situation called for God's intervention in order for the Messiah to be born, and the result was truly amazing—like no other birth.

God intervenes. Angels pop up at the right moment. A divine intervention intersects life and gives us a new perspective. Like cupid, an angel can bring people together, or so we believe. Joseph needed to be urged not to be too critical of Mary, and instead to love her, even as she was with child, his child from before marriage, or someone else's, or the child of the Holy Spirit. Of course, many people like to take the words literally, "a virgin birth,"

and not investigate the scholarly interpretations and mistranslations. And that's fine too. We all read stories as we will.

And the stories of our lives are full of need for God's intervention. When we are going along on a path with little focus or meaning, we need a voice that says, "Try a new path. Take action and make new decisions." Or when we are fearful and despairing about the future, we need a voice that says, "Don't be afraid. Things will get better. There is hope." And when we do not see the reality of our life because of denial or self-importance, we need a voice that says, "Look at your life. Stop and choose, is this the way you want to live?"

You may not believe in angels. But perhaps you believe in God who intervenes. Or you may not believe in an interventionist God, one who can change your life course. But perhaps you believe in the power of people to be angels.

We are the angels. When we become aware of a problem, we intervene. When we know someone needs help, we step up. This is being human, made in God's own image to be kind and giving. We are intended to bring love into one another's lives. Yesterday many families received gifts from this congregation's giving tree along with the meals our Men's Group provided. I hope these families know these gifts are tokens of our love. I hope the deliveries make a difference.

Love is God's gift to us. It came down at Christmas in the form of a baby: Emmanuel, God with us. This is incarnation. It is hard to know God unless God is with us. When Jesus was born more than 2000 years ago, we believe God intervened in the history of the world. God gave us love in the form of a human child. We say God's love is incarnated in Jesus. And God's love is incarnated in us. That's why we say we are the body of Christ, doing the work of love today in our time. And the way we do it, is by intervening in one another's lives, loving our family members, doing kind things for people we work with, caring for the sick, feeding the poor, and working for love and justice in society. That's what makes us all angels of love. God is with us today sending us out to meet the needs of the world, and like the angels of old, we can bring the love that is so needed. Love drives out fear. It intervenes in people's lives making us all alive to the wonders of living. Thanks be to God!