

# NORTHERN LIGHT

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## **God Stories or God Signs**

***In the September 2019 Northern Light Digest, I referred to the fact that I grew up in a storytelling family. Each time we get together for family gatherings we share each other's stories. They cause us to laugh, cry, and sometimes just wonder.***

In the September 2019 Northern Light Digest, I referred to the fact that I grew up in a storytelling family. Each time we get together for family gatherings we share each other's stories. They cause us to laugh, cry, and sometimes just wonder.

As you can probably notice, I'm really big on stories. For those who may have heard me speak, I often urge listeners to recall their "God Stories" and to share them with their church family and those outside of their church family.

These stories are a powerful testament of our personal relationship with our Triune God.

Recalling these stories enable us to gain comfort and strength when we face difficulties and challenges in our journey as Christian pilgrims.

The late Eugene Peterson in *The Message* sometimes used the term "God signs" in describing these interactions between people and God. Peterson was a great story teller in his own right and the author of many books on the pastoral and Christian life.

Eugene Peterson is also well known for reminding his students that the Bible is story. Although made up of different genres such as narrative, poetry, wisdom literature, prophecy, gospels, epistles (letters), plus apocalypse, all these genres tell a story. That story is how the Triune God has and continues to interact with all peoples.

A part of that story is recorded in Luke 2:1-20. Luke, the ultimate story teller, places the birth of the Messiah in a certain time within the Roman Empire. He explains the circumstances surrounding the birth of this baby—a Empire wide census. He then embellished the account with the "God Stories" or "God Signs" experienced by real shepherds who were working near Bethlehem.

I can only imagine what it was like at the family gatherings of those



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shepherds when they started to share their God Stories!  
In this issue of Northern Light Digest, pastor Jonathan Buck shares



with us the story behind the name Immanuel. May this story speak to your God Stories as we celebrate the birth of the true Immanuel, God with us.

**Bill Hall**

### Immanuel - the story behind that name...

The story behind *Immanuel* is based on three little boys, whose names were meant to give courage to the newly crowned 20 year old king Ahaz, king of the Jews. Young Ahaz was scared out of his wits, because two other kings had already killed thousands of his fellow Jews and carted off thousands more as prisoners (2 Chronicles 28).

And if Ahaz and his family died in the coming conflict it would be a disaster, because it would put an end to the prophecy in Jeremiah 33:17 that there would always be a king from the dynasty of David - leading up to the birth of Jesus.

One of the two invading kings was a fellow Israelite too, but he and the king of Syria were extremely angry at the Jews for not joining their alliance against the growing threat of Assyria. To Ahaz, then, it really did feel like the end was near; the young king and his people "are shaking like trees in the wind."

It's in response to their panic that God tells Isaiah to take his own young son, *Shear-Jashub* (Shee'ar-Yashub), and talk to king Ahaz (verse 3). The little chap doesn't actually say or do anything in the story, because it's his name that counts, which means *A Remnant Will Return*. So when Ahaz looks down at the little chap, does it dawn on him that the child is there with a name like that because God is sending him a message?

It means, Ahaz, that even if your people **are** all dragged off as prisoners, God will make sure that some of them will be released from captivity and they'll return to settle and rebuild.

But why get that message to Ahaz through a child? Because at age 20 Ahaz is little more than a child himself. So God sends Ahaz a fatherly figure in the person of Isaiah, and his little lad too, to remind Ahaz he can trust God like a child trusts his father. God is being ever so gentle here, in taking this shattered young king from shaking like a leaf to being a confident, fearless leader for his people.

So it's in a most fatherly way that Isaiah tells Ahaz in Isaiah 7:4, "Stay calm and don't be frightened by those two bullies, because to God they're just a couple of 'smouldering stubs of firewood'. They're all smoke and no flame. They can spout all they like about tearing Judah apart and dividing the spoils among them (verse 6),

but to God they're just pompous windbags, and what they're threatening to do will never happen (verse 7). So chin up, Ahaz, because," verse 9, "if you don't stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all."

And there we have the theme of the story: God wants Ahaz to trust him, because without trust what has Ahaz got? He's got nothing. He "will not stand at all."

But trusting God is a tough call for such a young man, because he has no previous proof that God will step in and save them. He's only got God's word for it. And Isaiah may think there's nothing to worry about, but in the real world of human emotion this was totally daunting.

But God clearly takes this into account too, because in verse 11 he makes a startling offer to Ahaz: he offers Ahaz "a sign" - of Ahaz's very own choosing too - and it can be anything "in the deepest depths or in the highest heights." Did you get that, Ahaz? You can ask for anything you want, and make it as extreme or as personal as you like, so you know when it happens that God is real, and he cares.

And to whom in the entire Old Testament had God made an offer like that? He hadn't. So why offer it to Ahaz of all people? Because the kingly line of David leading up to the birth of Jesus was at stake here, and its survival at this point in time was in the hands of a hopelessly unhinged young man who hadn't got a clue what to do.

So God didn't mind being asked to do something spectacular. But Ahaz says to Isaiah in verse 12, "No, I'm not going to ask God for a sign."

Ahaz thought he had a much better idea: he'd strip God's temple and the palace treasury of all their gold and silver and send it to Tiglath-Pileser, king of the mighty empire of Assyria, to seek an alliance with him.

Not surprisingly, Isaiah lets loose on Ahaz for refusing the sign - and he includes the whole "house of David" in his tirade in verses 13-14 - when he yells, "You people are enough to tire anyone out, but must that include tiring God out too? Well, God's going to give you a sign anyway, and here it is: a young woman will become pregnant and she will give birth to a baby boy and call him *Immanuel*, meaning **God with us**.

And this is where the second little boy enters the picture, and again it's in the boy's name that there's a message for Ahaz. God would be with Ahaz to lift him out of his doom and transform him from a scared rabbit into a man of strength, courage and calm, because this is what his people needed him to be.

And God backed that up with a promise in verse 16 too, that "before the boy *Immanuel* knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste." Before the boy is two years old, then, God will have solved the problem, and Ahaz won't even have to lift a finger.

So *Immanuel* was a sign backed up with a promise, which is where the third little boy enters the picture, a lad called *Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz*, Isaiah's second son (Isaiah 8:3). And this boy's name was clearly chosen by God too, because it meant **Quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil**, referring to Assyria stripping both Israel and Syria of all their wealth so they were no longer a threat

to the Jews (verse 4). In that little boy's name too, then, was the assurance that God was real and he cared.

So that's three little boys now, whose names all clearly meant that Ahaz had nothing to fear. The key question now was, "Would Ahaz believe it?" - because there was still that nagging warning back in Isaiah 7:9, that "If you do not stand firm in your faith, Ahaz, you will not stand at all."

But there's no indication in the story that Ahaz saw any significance in the names of these three boys - and the rest of his miserable 16 year long reign proved it, because he was totally useless to his people. So why would God go to all that trouble of having three children named as signs for Ahaz? If this entire story didn't mean anything to Ahaz, what was the point of it?

But God didn't remove this story from Scripture. He left it in, because one day the name *Immanuel* would appear again, and that's when this story would come alive.

And to help it come alive God left us another little clue in the story: it's in the location where God had Isaiah meet Ahaz, and it was so specific in its detail that God clearly had some meaning in it too. In Isaiah 7:3 God told Isaiah to meet Ahaz "at the end of the aqueduct of the Upper Pool on the road to the Fuller's Field." So why meet at that spot in particular?

Again, it's in the meaning of the name, because "Upper Pool" in Hebrew also means **The blessing of the Most High** - 'Upper' meaning 'most high', and 'Pool' meaning 'blessing'.

So what we've got now is 'the blessing of the Most High' flowing down a channel to the Fuller's Field where the fullers used the water to clean, bleach (to 'full' means to 'whiten') and give fullness and thickness to their woollen cloth. God had directed Isaiah to meet Ahaz at that very

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spot, because it was God's gentle way of telling Ahaz he would pour out a blessing on him - like the water flowing down from the Upper Pool - and it would have the same cleansing, whitening and filling effect on Ahaz as the fullers had on their cloth.

There was no "I get it" from Ahaz, however, so is there something here that's meant to come alive for us instead?

Well, how about the words of our *Immanuel* when he yelled out to the crowd at the temple in **John 7:38-39**, "Whoever believes in me, streams of living water will flow from within him. By this he meant the Spirit." The parallel with Isaiah 7 is interesting, in that belief in Jesus, who really is 'the blessing of the Most High', creates

looking to worldly methods for coping, just like Ahaz did, none of which will give me, or the people I care for, the peace that only God can give.

I can almost hear Isaiah saying, therefore, "Get a grip on yourself, and remember the sign of *Immanuel*, because it's just as much a sign for you that God is real, and he'll happily prove it so you can be an inspiration and a fearless strength to others. And then, hopefully, they'll realize what *Immanuel* can do for them too."

**Jonathan Buck**

***This, then, is what brings the story of Immanuel in Isaiah 7 alive. It's in God repeating it in our experience today, that he is with us to willingly give us the proof he's real and he cares - and especially in our scary moments - so we can say, "I know God is real, because of the clear and obvious signs of his existence he's given me. So trust him, and he'll do the same for you."***

"streams of living water" flowing out from within people because of the work of the Holy Spirit in them, just like the fullers turned woollen cloth into something practical and lovely to wear from the stream of water flowing down from the Upper Pool.

And God would have done that for Ahaz. He would have clothed Ahaz with the kind of faith, hope and courage that would have enabled him to stand before his people and say, "I know God will strengthen and help us, because he did the same for me."

And wouldn't you love that same confidence when talking to others who doubt God's existence? Well, that's what Jesus promised in John 7:38, that "streams of living water flow from within us" in such a way that others receive faith, hope and courage too.

This, then, is what brings the story of *Immanuel* in Isaiah 7 alive. It's in God repeating it in our experience today, that he is with us to willingly give us the proof he's real and he cares - and especially in our scary moments - so we can say, "I know God is real, because of the clear and obvious signs of his existence he's given me. So trust him, and he'll do the same for you."

Because in reality what have we got to offer people if we haven't got that? If I have no story to tell that God is real, what have I got? Like Ahaz, I have nothing. I am just another typical human being who gets all stressed out and feeling sorry for myself, and I'll be

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