

Baccalaureate Mass
December 14, 2012
St. Ignatius Church

This Gospel sets the stage for the birth of Jesus. But it does more than that. It articulates our fundamental faith conviction that Jesus is Emanuel – “God with us.” The story of Jesus is more than a narrative about a Jewish baby boy born in a stable. It is the story of God reaching out to us – to touch, to heal, to console, to forgive – to be with us through it all.

Christmas is the story of a God so passionately in love with us that he refused to leave us alone, a God who could not abandon us to our own devices. Christmas is the story of a God who becomes one of us, so that we might finally and forever be one with God.

I recall a true story that a mother told about her baby, as recorded by the author, William Bausch. Like the Christmas story, this one has significance beyond the facts of the story itself. I quote:

Our family had spent the Christmas holiday in San Francisco, but in order for us to be back at work on Monday, we had to drive the 400 miles to Los Angeles on Christmas Day.

We stopped for lunch in King City at a nearly empty restaurant, where we were the only family and ours were the only children. I heard Erik, my one year old, squeal with glee. "Hithere," the two words he always thought were one. "Hithere," and he pounded his fat baby hands -- whack, whack, whack -- on the metal high chair. His face was alive with excitement, his eyes were wide, gums bared in a toothless grin. He wriggled and giggled, and then I saw the source of his merriment. And my eyes could not take it in all at once. A tattered rag of a coat -- dirty, greasy, and worn; baggy pants; spindly body; toes that poked out of would-be shoes; a shirt that had ring-around-the-collar all over it; and a face like none other -- gums as bare as Erik's. "Hi there, baby. Hi there, big boy, I see ya, Buster."

My husband and I exchanged a look that was a cross between "What do we do?" and "Poor devil." Our meal came and the banging and the noise continued. Now the old bum was shouting across the room, "Do you know patty cake? Atta boy. Do you know peek-a-boo? Hey, look! He knows peek-a-boo!" Erik continued to laugh and answer, "Hithere." Every call was echoed. Nobody thought it was cute. The guy was a drunk and a disturbance. I was embarrassed. My husband, Dennis, was humiliated. Even our six year old said, "Why is that old man talking so loud?"

Dennis went to pay the check, imploring me to get Erik and meet him in the parking lot. "Lord, just let me get out of here before he speaks to me or Erik," and I bolted for the door. It soon was obvious that both the Lord and Erik had other plans. As I drew closer to the man, I turned my back, walking to side-step him and any air that he was breathing.

As I did so, Erik leaned over my arm, reaching with both arms to a baby's pick-me-up position. In a split-second of balancing my baby and turning to counter his weight, I came eye-to-eye with the old man. Erik was lunging for him, arms spread wide ... Erik propelled himself from my arms to the man. Suddenly a very old man and a very young baby sealed their love relationship. Erik laid his tiny head upon the man's ragged shoulder.

The man's eyes closed and I saw tears hover beneath the lashes. His aged hands, full of grime and pain and hard labor, gently, so gently, cradled my baby's bottom and stroked his back. I stood awestruck. The old man rocked and cradled Erik in his arms for a moment, and then his eyes opened and set squarely on mine. He said in a firm, commanding voice, "You take care of this baby." And somehow I managed "I will" from a throat that contained a stone. He pried Erik from his chest, unwillingly, longingly, as though he was in pain. I held my arms open to receive my baby, and again the gentleman addressed me: "God bless you, M'am. You've given me my Christmas gift." I said nothing more than a muttered "thanks."

With Erik in my arms, I ran for the car. Dennis wondered why I was crying and holding Erik so tightly. And why I was muttering, "God, forgive me."

Erik is Emmanuel – God reaching out to embrace us tattered individuals and our lives, with our tattered hurts, our tattered relationships, and our tattered sins.

Erik is two arms determined to break into our lives through self-and-socially-constructed barriers. Erik makes no distinctions and embraces the least likely. Erik is the child who leads us. Erik is Emmanuel. That's the underlying truth beneath the story of Jesus – it's the story of God's fulfilled desire to be with us through it all.

As you leave the Hilltop, know that God really is Emmanuel, and so are you. God is with you and you are with God. Whatever and wherever life leads you, our passionate God reaches out to take you into his loving arms and empowers you to do the same. Emmanuel is the Christmas gift we have all been given and may, in turn, give to all. May you know the joy of giving and receiving Emmanuel now and forever.