DISCOVERING HIS PRESENCE THROUGHOUT THE ADVENT SEASON

Spirit Christmas

CYNTHIA RUCHTI





#### **Books by Cynthia Ruchti**

Facing the Dawn
The Spirit of Christmas
Restoring Christmas
An Endless Christmas



DISCOVERING HIS PRESENCE
THROUGHOUT THE ADVENT SEASON

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 To the One who hovers
over and breathes within us
this Advent season and always.



This Advent season, we can continue to train our focus on unwashed shepherds and an uncomfortable birthing center, or we can turn our attention to watch for the not-so-hidden evidence of the presence of the Spirit.

### INTRODUCTION

The spirits of Christmas Past, Present, and Future gave Scrooge the worst case of insomnia in *A Christmas Carol*. But the Spirit of Christmas is not a Dickens concept. The Spirit of the living God has forever been an integral part of the Savior's birth story we celebrate at Christmas, since long before the holy babe was conceived.

We haven't always noticed. We've focused on tattered shepherds and loud-mouthed angels. We've focused on a silent stable, road-weary wise men and curious stars, or a wide-eyed young mom and her stymied fiancé.

But the Spirit was there. The Bible tells us He hovered over waters and chaos prior to God the Father's words that gave birth to beginnings. And He hovers over every page of the Christmas story.

This Advent season, we can continue to train our focus on unwashed shepherds and an uncomfortable birthing center, or we can turn our attention to watch for the not-so-hidden evidence of the presence of the Spirit.

On the spaces provided, feel free to record your impressions of those Spirit-sightings as we walk through this evidence together. Included in the back of the book are additional resources, links to accompanying music, and ten family Christmas activities to help you make room for the Spirit.

What you discover may form a new tradition for you and your family—a Christmas seek-and-find.



## The Christmas Story Started in a Garden

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

Genesis 1:2

ell me the Christmas story, Grandpa."

When has a request like that ever been answered with a cleared throat and the words "Way back before there was day and night, sun and moon, plants and animals, way before people existed, the Spirit of God hovered over the waters, the chaos, the nothingness"?

The child interrupts, tempering her rising frustration. "Grandpa, tell me about the reindeer and the elves and the candy canes."

"That's not the real Christmas story."

"Then tell me the *real* one, with the baby in the hay and 'no room in the inn' and angels singing 'Go Tell It on the Mountain.' There's no Spirit in that story."

"Oh, but there is. And that makes it all the more amazing."

**•** • •

Grandpa was right. The Christmas story we cherish, the one we've built a whole season around, the one we celebrate with candlelight services and charcuterie boards, with sacrificial giving (or overspending) and aromas that have become treasured memories—sugar cookies, hot cider, cinnamon, glazed ham or roast turkey or both—is a Holy Spirit story.

He was there from the beginning. It started in a garden.

Like searching for family origins, we can trace the presence of the Holy Spirit to a time before Eden was a reality—fully documented in the book of Genesis. The Spirit hovered over the Creation scene, stirring the waters as He often does, directing the wind, breathing life into bird and lizard lungs and Adam's lungs. God said, "Let us make mankind in *our* image" (Genesis 1:26, emphasis added). So they—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—did.

The first time the Spirit was grieved also took place in the Garden, when sin entered the scene, introducing rot, decay, and death into the newly formed, perfect world. This act also introduced our obvious need for a Savior.

They say the first crime recorded in the Bible was murder—Cain's murder of Abel. But wasn't the first crime stealing? Robbery? God clearly informed Adam and Eve that everything else in the Garden was free for them to eat (see Genesis 2:16–17). He also clearly said, "This tree is mine. No trespassing. Do not take and eat from this one, specific tree."

But with unimaginable abundance around them, Adam and Eve ignored what had been the only existing edict, stole God's property (I'd forgotten about the trespassing part until just now. You, too?), poisoned the atmosphere that had not known disease until that moment, and hacked into the system to rewire our DNA for pain, addiction, misplaced affections, relationship conflict, and the big one—death.

How many life sentences could be piled on top of one another?

But the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit loved what they'd created together. With the pronouncement of humanity's sentence recorded in Genesis 3, they also shared the first hint that a Redeemer would come to defeat the enemy who had defeated God's children.

Adam and Eve didn't know they wouldn't live to see that Redeemer, Jesus, arrive as a babe. What kind of therapy would they

have needed if they'd been told it would be (by some accounts) four thousand years before anyone worthy of the task would step in to shoulder their sentence? The indictment their children and grandchildren and great-great-(plus an estimated 131 more greats) grandchildren had been subject to since Eve's hand touched a fruit's velvety skin? The two broken people in the first Garden likely told each other, "Just wait. Help is coming."

And thus was born the first cry of "How long?"

Consider this. In the New Testament, we're told that the velvety, God-given fruit of the Holy Spirit—evidence that the Holy Spirit is at work within us—is characterized by love, joy, peace, *patience*... (see Galatians 5:22–23).

The connection between the Holy Spirit and patience began in the Garden. He knew the Redeemer would eventually come, bringing what we now call Christmas.

For millennia—grieved but hopeful and always hovering—the Spirit continued to whisper, *Patience. Wait with hope.* 

#### PONDERINGS \*

How far back can you trace your ancestors? How many generations?

How far back can you trace your family's faith history?

This Christmas, will your family be the first in your line to honor the presence of the Holy Spirit woven throughout the Christmas story, or are you carrying on a cherished tradition of recognizing He's been there all along?

What have you been longing for, praying for, waiting for? In the stillness of this moment, can you hear the Spirit whisper, *Wait with hope?* 

#### ADVENT PRAYER \*

Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on me as I move through these days anticipating Christmas, noticing and celebrating You.

Amen.



# Isaiah's Conversation with the Spirit

For unto us a Child is born.

as your family started planning meals for your holiday get-togethers? If a charcuterie board is somewhere in your planning, you're so on-trend. Are your holidays meals largely traditional—same stuffing or dressing recipe served in the same bowl Great-Grandma used? Same veggie sides? Same array of pies—pumpkin for Mom and pecan for Dad and chocolate silk for the kids?

After all that meal prep, inevitably someone shows up and announces, "I'm on a juice cleanse this week," or "Sorry. I just ate. I'll have a glass of water, please. No ice."

Three hundred years ago, a great deal of thought was put into meals for a man who was so laser-focused on his work that for almost three weeks he refused everything prepared for him. He barely slept. Those who brought him food returned many hours later to find it untouched. Day after day.

The task with which the man was so obsessed? Committing to paper what the Holy Spirit was moving him to pen, a master-piece we now know as Handel's *Messiah*. The motivation that kept George Frideric Handel up at night—furiously scribbling so he didn't miss any nuance—was rooted in what had kept Isaiah the prophet up all night 2,400 years earlier—a voice from heaven speaking into the darkness:

For unto us a Child is born,
Unto us a Son is given;
And the government will be upon His shoulder.
And His name will be called
Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 9:6 NKJV

A performance of Handel's *Messiah*, with the above Scripture verse among the lyrics, may well be part of your Advent or Christmas traditions. A community or church choir concert. Or a high school choral concert.

In our small town in the Midwest, the final song of the annual high school Christmas concert was always a hold-your-breath, wait-for-it, now-I'm-in-the-Christmas-spirit moment.

The finale began with an invitation from the choral director to the audience. Any past choir members, no matter how long ago they'd graduated, were invited to join the freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors on the risers. Although students offered to share their music folders, most of the adults didn't need the prop.

The words and passion of Handel's *Messiah* had followed them after graduation and lived in their memories. The "Hallelujah" chorus rang out with both young and mature voices forming a soul-stirring blend of rejoicing that never failed to move the concertgoers.

The piece united young and old in our public high school. It impressed mechanics and bank presidents, grocery clerks and stylists, doctors and military veterans, and teachers who told others to "watch your language" regarding any discussion related to faith, God, Jesus, or the Bible. It was an oratorio originally composed for an Easter performance (Christ's resurrection as the finale), not Christmas.

The finale—final stamp—of the concert? "And He shall reign forever and ever. King of kings and Lord of lords. Forever. And ever. And ever. And ever. . . . Hal-le-lu-jah!"

Atheist, agnostic, Christ follower, *passionate* Christ follower—all who have ever joined that chorus have confessed with their mouths that Jesus is Lord.

Why would that have been allowed? Because Handel's *Messiah* is considered a work of musical art . . . as is everything the Spirit of God touches.

We're told the lyrics of the *Messiah* were taken from the books of Isaiah, Haggai, Malachi, Luke, Zechariah, Matthew, John, Psalms, Lamentations, Romans, Revelation, Job, and 1 Corinthians. I have intentionally kept these mentions beyond the confines of alphabetical or chronological order. As Handel's *Messiah* was written, the composer drew from whichever part of Scripture spoke to that musical moment.

The thrilling connections make me want to add, as the psalmists often did, *SELAH* (which from the Hebrew is often translated "pause and reflect").

Where do you turn when you or your family is interested in taking a look at the Christmas story, the story of Jesus's birth? The second chapter of Luke? It's the go-to.

Those few verses provide only part of the narrative, though. As George Frideric Handel did, we can find elements scattered like delicious charcuterie board bread crumbs—or pita scraps—leading us to the destination of Jesus. And who scattered the crumbs? The Holy Spirit.

Let's focus on the Isaiah portion of the story as we observe the presence of the Holy Spirit throughout every layer of Advent, the same that Handel explored when composing "For unto us a child is born."

We might assume the prophet Isaiah was unaware how widereaching his message would be. He would not have imagined that his words would find their way into the canon of Scripture, the body of writing we know as the Bible. It's hard to imagine the prophet could have predicted anyone would put his words to music that would become an iconic December song to help usher in the holiday season for so many people over the centuries. Or that you may have taken the opportunity to listen to it a few minutes ago.

God's Word tells us that two of the Holy Spirit's assignments are to offer comfort and hope (see John 14:26; 16:7; Romans 15:13). It's hard to comprehend how many people have taken comfort and drawn hope from these potent and stirring words since they were breathed into the atmosphere in ages past:

And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

If you're like me, the Spirit within roars to life when a chorale or orchestra reaches the heavily accented "Wonderful!" in Handel's version.

This "unto us is born" child, this Jesus Christ.

Predicted, promised, prophesied.

The short passage is so memorable it comes to mind without much prompting. Lingering there (*selah*) can reveal so much about the Promised One. The Christ child, the Son, who is also called Mighty God. The Son who is known as Everlasting Father.

Revelation floods us with a reminder that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one. What is true about God the Father is true about the Son and about the Holy Spirit.

Many have wondered why the prophet Isaiah used words best translated "is born." It hadn't happened yet. Some scholars say the grammatical tense Isaiah uses is not the present perfect tense most graduates are quick to leave behind when they finish their final English class.

It is instead a *prophetic* perfect tense literary technique, viewing something yet to happen with the surety as if it has been already accomplished.

Isaiah, the same prophet, tells us that the Son of God was wounded for our transgressions, although that action would not happen until long into the future (see Isaiah 53:5).

When the ancient prophet claimed that "unto us a Child is born," he'd been given—by insight from the Holy Spirit—the words and confidence for an action that would not be fulfilled for seven hundred years. And yet, because of God's faithfulness and unchanging nature, for Isaiah and those who listened to him, it was as good as done . . . until the moment it was done.

The culture in which Isaiah lived was desperate for a wise and trustworthy counselor, desperate for assurance, desperate for peace. The people were divided, held captive, resorting to ransom, with distress and darkness and fear part of their everyday existence.

But that prophetic perfect tense (don't stress, not on the test) promise flowed from Isaiah's mouth—"For unto us a Child is born" (Isaiah 9:6 NKJV).

Isaiah wouldn't have known that seven hundred years would pass before the birth of Jesus and the fulfillment of that prophecy. We—included in the *us* of "unto us"—look behind us more than two thousand years. By now, humanity has talked about that child almost three times as long as Isaiah's prophecy was old before it came to pass.

Catch the role of the Spirit when, a couple of chapters later in Isaiah, the prophet is inspired to say, "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse [from David's family tree]; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The *Spirit* of the LORD will rest on him—the *Spirit* of wisdom and of understanding, the *Spirit* of counsel and of might, the *Spirit* of the knowledge and fear of the LORD—and he will delight in the fear of the LORD" (Isaiah 11:1–3, emphasis added).

Was Isaiah convinced the Holy Spirit flows freely through the ancient and yet ever-new story of the Christ child?

Forever and ever, and ever, and ever . . . hallelujah!

#### PONDERINGS \*

What's your or your family's favorite Christmas song? A carol? A hymn?

Create a playlist of only your favorites, weeding out the reindeer and snowflakes and focusing on the impact of the birth of the Christ child, the gift of the Father, or the presence of the Spirit.

#### **♦ ADVENT PRAYER ◆**

Spirit of God, help us notice the "crumbs" You left throughout the Word that point so clearly to the truth on which we rest our faith.

Amen.

## Holy Spirit Nudges AT CHRISTMAS

Most of us recognize when we're being prompted to go out of our way to bless someone, to serve or give or meet a need. We may not have always recognized it, though, as a nudge from the Holy Spirit.

This Advent season, consider how He may be prompting you to do the outrageous. Even with the cost of the meal more like a down payment on a house, consider forfeiting your own lavish Christmas dinner in favor of frozen pizza for Christmas Day. Offer your turkey or ham and trimmings to a needy family.



### Immanuel, God with Us . . . God Within Us

"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

Matthew 1:23

s a trip to the craft or hobby store part of your routine when preparing your home for the holidays? If so, you may wrestle with a spelling dilemma. A wreath in one aisle sports a gold-edged ribbon with the name Emmanuel. In the next aisle, a piece of antique-looking decoupage-able sheet music is titled "Immanuel."

Clearance-bin treasures reveal a rustic tin sign with a small boo-boo in the corner. It is easy to disguise with a sprig of holly, and the price is more than fair. But will you have to fight off the grammar nerds if it hangs in your home? The wording is "Emanuel—God with us." What happened to the other *M*?

Come to think of it, your neighborhood boasts an Immanuel Lutheran, an Emanuel Baptist, and an Emmanuel Church of the Holiness of the Almighty God Eternal Joy assembly. Those church-naming teams must have undergone quite the spelling debate before settling on their majority-rules choice.

Or is there another explanation? And why would it matter, if it does?

In the Old Testament, whose historical records, prophecy, and poetry were written in Hebrew, the name is Immanuel from the Hebrew and Aramaic Immanu (with us) + El (God). In the New Testament, recorded in Greek—the written language of the day—the name emphasizes the purpose of the word Emmanuel, shortened to Emmanuel in most translations. In essence, one translates the pronunciation. The other translates the meaning.

The amazement for us, though, is that Immanuel of 2,700 years ago and Emmanuel of about 2,000 years ago is Immanuel/Emmanuel/Emanuel of today—Jesus, God-with-us. We don't take it lightly that the God-with-us promised in Isaiah 7:14 is the God-with-us fulfilled in Jesus of the Matthew record in the New Testament and the God-with-us (present tense) through the Holy Spirit with—as in within—us now.

Isaiah 7:14 notes the prophetic words, "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."

Matthew 1:22 reveals a personal comment in the middle of Joseph's dream about the child his betrothed, Mary, is carrying. The angel of the Lord assures Joseph that this is God's plan, that the child is to be called Jesus "because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). Matthew's comment is this: "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord has said through the prophet: 'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' (which means 'God with us')" (Matthew 1:22–23).

Matthew wanted no one to misunderstand. The child Isaiah called Immanuel is the child the Holy Spirit implanted in Mary, the Jesus whom Matthew proclaimed as the prophecy's fulfillment.

The ancient Israelites heard Isaiah's prophecy and wondered what it could mean.

Early New Testament-era believers knew Jesus as God with (among) them. There in the flesh beside them, walking the roads they walked, eating with them, speaking with them, healing their diseases and heartaches, telling stories that both captivated and confused them. He was with them in human form ... for a time. Spoiler alert: He dies young.

We are the generations blessed to know a "with" deeper than even the disciples—His closest followers—could begin to experience before Jesus returned to the right hand of His Father. We know this Immanuel/Emmanuel within.

Where is the Holy Spirit in the Christmas story? He is the Immanuel who never leaves, the one Jesus in the flesh remarkably

described as better than His presence with those with whom He walked and talked. Better? Could Jesus have misspoken?

No. He never chose the wrong word. He is the Word (see John 1).

He specifically selected the word better or for your benefit, to your advantage, as the Greek and other Bible translations express it. What could be better than being in the room where it happens, standing so near Jesus that the disciples could see beads of sweat on His brow, His squint against the midday sun, hear from His own ears the around-the-campfire story of His birth, first told to Him by His mother?

#### Better?

It may not seem like a typical Advent Scripture passage, but consider rereading Jesus's heartfelt words to His closest followers in the days before His physical presence left them. John chapters 14–16 can provide a far more beautiful backdrop than any mantel decoration or wreath on the door as the Christmas celebration approaches.

In essence, Jesus is encouraging us not to get spiritually stuck in the Bethlehem stable and not to rest our faith on His birth alone. We're not to stay rooted in only what He did while on earth. That's nearsighted. He's urging His followers—us—not to cling to the image of our Savior on the cross, or of the empty cross, or even of the empty tomb.

Each of those events is important. They are vital components of our understanding of God and His plan and of Jesus and His sacrificial life, death, and resurrection.

Jesus carefully chose His words when telling His followers that something even more spectacular, better, fuller, and more advantageous was on the horizon for them that would serve as a promise for all of us since that moment.

His coming to earth brought hope. His leaving the earth offered us the opportunity to be comforted more fully, to be taught more than He had time to teach in person, and to reach more than He could reach on foot.

What a stirring concept! Jesus had more to tell us and was eager for the season in which, although He was returning to His Father, we could have the advantage of the Holy Spirit within us, ever-present.

Where is the Holy Spirit in the nativity scene at church? He is in those who observe it. Where is He in the songs we cherish? In the breath of our voices. Where is He in gift exchanges? In us, spurred by His generosity in giving and His humility in asking nothing in return.

Where will we find the Holy Spirit in our Advent preparations? In the wisdom of decisions, the counsel of ways to bless others, the stirring in our hearts that celebrates a story started long ago with captivating chapters that include this Immanuel, this Emmanuel, residing within us.

Inseparable presence.

Unspeakable peace.

#### PONDERINGS \*

Take a moment to look up companion verses Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:23 in the Bible you use most often. Note that the KJV uses Emmanuel. The NKJV, NASB, NLT, HCSB, and NIV, among others, use the Immanuel spelling. No matter the version, it's the same God-with-us. How does that have an impact on your appreciation of the nearness of God?

#### \* ADVENT PRAYER \*

Holy Spirit, we recognize that Your presence within changes how we view all the external elements that herald Christ's coming as a babe.

Give us clear vision to see where we may have missed You in years past.

We look to You as our Comfort, Guide, Protector, Convincer, and Revealer of the heart of God the Father, as Jesus promised.

Soften our hearts to the story long-told.

May we see Christmas as You see it, from Your divine and indwelling perspective.

Amen.