

As the sun went down Christmas Eve, George sat down beside a coffee pot in the office of his gas station. December 24th had become just another day since his wife passed away several years earlier. He didn't hate Christmas. He just couldn't find a reason to celebrate it anymore. Suddenly, the office door opened, and a homeless man stepped inside. He didn't want to deal with a homeless man that night, but he was glad for the company. So he told him to sit by the heater to warm up. *"Thank you, but I don't mean to intrude,"* the stranger said. *"No problem,"* George said. Then he handed the man a thermos with stew, saying *"It ain't great, but it's hot."*

As he was speaking, the "ding" of the driveway bell told him he had a customer at one of the full-serve pumps. *"Excuse me,"* he said to the man, *"I'll be right back."* Then he put on his coat and went outside. An old Chevy sat at the pump, spewing steam from the radiator. The driver was panicked. *"Can you help me?"* he said, *"my wife has gone into labor, but my car is dying."* From the amount of fluid the radiator was spewing George thought it was cracked.

"Well you're not going any further in this," George said. Then he turned and walked back to the office. Not knowing why George just walked away, the man followed him, pleading *"I need your help. Please."* But before he could get those words out, George came back out of the office with a set of keys, explaining that they were to the truck sitting in the garage bay. Pointing at it, George said to the man *"she ain't the best thing you ever looked at, but she runs."* George then helped the woman into the truck and watched as it sped off into the night.

When he went back into the office, he told the homeless man *"glad I gave them the truck. Their tires were shot too. But I just put new ones on my truck. It'll get them to the hospital just fine."* George turned away from the homeless man for a moment to get a cup of coffee, and when he turned back, the man was gone. His thermos was on the desk, empty, with a used coffee cup beside it. *"Well, at least he got something to eat,"* George said to himself.

George then decided to go back outside to see if the old Chevy would start. It cranked slowly, but it started. So he pulled it into the bay where the truck had been. He thought he would tinker with it for something to do, as Christmas Eve typically meant only a few customers. He quickly discovered the radiator wasn't actually cracked. A hose had split, sending radiator fluid all over the place, and causing the steamy mess he saw when the man pulled into the station. *"I can fix that"* George said to himself. So he did. Then looking at the tires on the old Chevy, he said to no one in particular, *"Those tires aren't going to make through the winter."* So he took the tires off of his wife's old Lincoln, which was parked in the other garage bay. They were like new, and he wasn't going to drive that car anyway. Suddenly, George heard what sounded like gun shots.

He ran outside, and saw a police officer on the ground next to his quad car. He was bleeding from the shoulder, and moaned, *"Help me."* George helped the officer into the gas station office, where his training as an Army medic in Vietnam kicked in. His first thought: *"apply pressure to stop the bleeding."* Since the uniform rental company had left clean shop towels that morning, he used them and duct tape to bind the wound. *"They say duct tape can fix anything"* he joked to try to put the policeman at ease. His next thought: *"Give him something for the pain."*

Looking behind his office counter, all he could find were the pills he used when his back would go out. *"These will have to do,"* he said to himself, and put some water in a cup and gave the policeman the pills. *"Hang in there"* he told him, *"I'm going to get you an ambulance."* But when he picked up the office phone, there was no dial tone. *"Maybe I can get you help on your car's radio,"* he told the policeman, and hurried out the door. But when he got to the squad care he discovered that a stray bullet had destroyed the radio. So he ran back into the office, where he found the policeman sitting next to the coffee urn.

"The guy that shot me is probably still in the area, since he was on foot" the policeman said. Not grasping why he was telling him that, George returned to his medic training, and pulled back his makeshift bandage job to check for bleeding. *"I think it looks worse than it is,"* he told the policeman, *"it seems the bullet passed right through without hitting anything vital."* Since there was nothing else he could do but wait for someone to come along to help, George poured the policeman a cup of coffee. As soon as he had done so, the office door flew open. There in front of them, stood a young man with a gun.

"Give me your cash!" the young man barked. His hands were shaking and George could tell that he had never done anything like this before. *"That's the guy that shot me!"* the policeman said nervously. *"Why are you doing this?"* George asked. *"You need to put away the cannon, or somebody else might get hurt."* That statement confused the young man, but after a moment of hesitation, he yelled *"Shut up old man, or I'll shoot you, too! Just give me the cash!"* George saw that the policeman was quietly trying to un-holster his gun. *"Put that away,"* George said to him, *"we've got one too many guns being waved around in here already."*

George then turned back to the young man. *"It's Christmas Eve,"* George said, *"if you need money I'll give it to you."* He then pulled \$150 out of his pocket, handed it to the man, and reached for the barrel of the gun at the same time. The young man released his grip on the gun, fell to his knees, and began to cry. *"I'm not very good at this,"* the young man sobbed. *"I lost my job, my rent is due, and my car got repossessed. I don't even have enough to buy my wife and son a Christmas present."* As the young man sobbed, George handed the gun to the officer. Then he turned back to the young man, saying *"we all get in a bit of squeeze now and then. The road gets hard sometimes, but we make it through the best we can."*

George got the young man to sit down on a chair across from the officer. Then he went on, saying *"As a result, we sometimes we do stupid things to try to fix things, and only make them worse."* As the young man continued to sob, George handed him a cup of coffee, and said *"but being stupid is one of the things that makes us human. Coming in here with a gun isn't the answer. So get warm and we'll sort this out."* By that point, the young man had stopped crying. He looked over to the policeman, and said *"sorry I shot you. I didn't mean to do so, it just went off."* *"Shut up and drink your coffee,"* the policeman snapped.

Apparently, someone had reported the gunshots, and when dispatch couldn't reach the officer that should have been in that area, they responded, and the sound of sirens announced they were getting

close. A few minutes later, a squad car and an ambulance skidded to a halt outside. Two policeman burst into the office, guns drawn. *"You ok?"* one of them asked the wounded officer. *"Not bad for a guy who took a bullet,"* he replied. *"Who did this?"* the other cop asked. The wounded policeman answered *"I don't know. The guy ran off into the dark."* George and the young man looked at each other, puzzled. *"That guy work here?"* the first police officer asked. *"Yep,"* George said, following the lead of the wounded officer, *"I hired him today."*

At that point, the paramedics rushed in, and loaded the wounded police officer onto a stretcher. As they were about to wheel him out, the young man over him, and in a whisper, asked *"Why?"* The wounded officer smiled, and said *"Merry Christmas."* As soon as they left, George went into the storage room and came back with a box. He pulled out a ring. *"Here is something for your wife,"* he said to the young man, *"I don't think Martha would mind. She said it would come in handy some day."* *"I can't take this,"* the young man said, *"it means something to you."* *"And now it means something to you,"* George replied.

"I've got my memories," George then added *"that's all I need."* George then went behind the counter. Reaching under, he pulled out a toy airplane, a toy car, and a toy truck. They were left by the oil company for him to sell. *"Here's something for your boy,"* he told the young man. At that, the young man began to cry again. He pulled out the \$150 George had handed over earlier. *"You keep that too,"* George said, *"you'll need it to buy Christmas dinner."* With tears streaming down his face, the young man began to leave, but then turned back, saying *"I'm willing to be here in the morning to work, if that job offer still holds."* *"Nope,"* George replied, *"I'm closed on Christmas day . . . but be here at 8 am the next day."*

When the young man left, George thought he was alone again. But then he turned to see the homeless man. *"Where'd you come from?"* George asked, *"I thought you left?"* *"I've been here the whole time,"* the man said. *"You tell people that you don't celebrate Christmas. Why?"* the homeless man asked. *"Well,"* George said, *"after my wife passed away, I just couldn't see what the bother was about. Putting up a tree seemed a waste of a good pine tree. And baking cookies like I used to with Martha just wasn't the same."* The man put his hand on George's shoulder, and said *"Actually, you celebrate Christmas quite well. You gave me food and drink when I was cold and hungry. That pregnant woman will bear a son who will become a doctor. The officer you helped will go on to save 19 people from terrorists. And the young man who tried to rob you will make you a rich man and not take anything but his wages from you. That is what the real Christmas spirit looks like, and you keep it as good as anyone ever has."*

George was taken aback by what the homeless man said. *"You seem to know a lot about me,"* George finally said in reply. *"Trust me, George. I have the inside track on this sort of thing. And when your days here on earth are done, you will be with Martha again."* As soon as he said that, the stranger moved toward the door. Turning back, he then said *"But if you will excuse me, I have to go. I have a celebration planned."* George watched as the man's worn jacket and torn pants turned into a white robe. A golden light then began to fill the room. And as the man went out the door he said *"You see, George . . . it's my birthday. Merry Christmas."*

In many ways, the experiences we have endured have been just as traumatic as what George had in his gas station that fictitious Christmas Eve. Things have been all over the place for us, with one chaotic thing after another occurring. And just when we have thought things have settled down, we have been hit with a new twist, a new problem, a new wave of difficulty. But in the midst of it all, unseen by us, Jesus (*“Immanuel”*) has been present with us. Jesus (*“Immanuel”*) has been walking with us. Jesus (*“Immanuel”*) has been seeking to offer us the opportunity to not only celebrate the gift of *“abundant life”* and *“eternal life,”* but to actually RECEIVE such things. This is because the celebration of Christmas isn’t meant to just help us remember the birth of a baby 2,000 years ago, but to recall how in the birth of that baby God opens the door to us being able to receive His gift of *“abundant life”* and *“eternal life.”* But just like George, we often don’t see God’s presence (*“Immanuel”*) with us, offering us such things in the midst of the chaos swirling around us.

So on this Christmas Eve, I invite you to look anew for Jesus (*“Immanuel”*), God with us . I invite you to embrace anew Jesus (*“Immanuel”*), God with us. And I invite you to make the decision - for the very first time or once again - to let Jesus (*“Immanuel”*) give you the *“abundant life”* and *“eternal life”* He took on flesh to offer you. For that is what Christmas is all about.