

Any former church Christmas pageant stars out there? Shout out to the Marys and the Josephses. Shout out to the humble shepherds, the ones who got the boring costumes. Shout out to the joyful angels with halos made out of Christmas tree garland. Shout out to the jewel-laden kings (who, if you were in the church Christmas pageant in the late '80s like your pastor, probably wore a costume made by someone who went a bit overboard with the Bedazzler -- remember those?). Shout out to the kid who ended up playing the donkey year after year. Ah, the church Christmas pageant. What a special kind of chaos.

Maybe you didn't grow up in church, and maybe you never starred in a church Christmas pageant (and God bless you, that's probably why you look so well-adjusted). But I was what one might call an "over-churched" child, so I was in several. The most memorable one? The pageant that was about having Christmas in every season, 365 days a year.

I still remember the songs from that particular Christmas pageant. 🎵 "365 Days of Christmas each year... every day, a day to smile, God's love shining all the while." 🎵 (Pretty impressive, right? Thirty years later? See, these are the kinds of things that get stuck in my head when I'm trying to remember things like my online banking password.) "365 days of Christmas each year." That was the title song of the pageant, of course. And there was a song for every month or every season, too. There was this Christmas-and- Halloween mashup number that included a chorus line at the end. And a "Christmas in July" tune with some rock-and-roll flare. (My cousin played the angel and did [hand motion] a lot in that one, all while trying unsuccessfully to convince my mom, the pageant director, that she should get to wear a summer bathing suit as part of

her angel costume.) I told you: church Christmas pageants are a special kind of chaos.

But it obviously had some staying power, and had a real point, too. The whole point of that Christmas pageant can be boiled down to a single question: *Why can't we celebrate Christmas all year long?*

The answer: We can, especially here. This is Bethlehem, right? It's always Christmas in Bethlehem. So, church: welcome to Christmas in July.

So, yeah, part of the reason we're celebrating Christmas in July is because the pastor still has Christmas pageant songs from the late '80s stuck in her head. Part of the reason we're celebrating Christmas in July is because it's fun and it gives me an excuse to wear my "It's Always Christmas in Bethlehem" t-shirt. Part of the reason we're celebrating Christmas in July is because we're doing some holiday mulligans this summer -- we couldn't celebrate our beloved holidays the way we would've liked during COVID-tide, and while we can't get that time back, we can celebrate anew. That's part of the reason why we're celebrating Christmas in July.

But it's not just that. It's not just a relic from the ghosts of Christmas pageants past, or an opportunity for some good summer fun, or a chance to make up for lost time. It's more than that. Christmas in July is a powerful declaration: What we celebrate at Christmas isn't just true at Christmas (as if God's miraculous activity is somehow time-sensitive and available for a limited time only). What we celebrate at Christmas isn't just true at Christmas.

And what do we celebrate at Christmas?

[Matthew 1:18, 22-23, NIV]

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant

through the Holy Spirit. ... All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had 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").

*They will call him Immanuel, which means "God with us."* (It does, by the way. It does mean that. I even went to seminary and took a Hebrew class just to make sure. "Im" - with / "nu" - us / "El" - God. Im-nu-el. Immanuel. God with us.)

It's a powerful proclamation... and it's not time-sensitive. It's not available for a limited time only. It is true at all times, and in all seasons, which is why we can put up Christmas trees and light our little candles and sing "Silent Night" in July. We do these things out of season because when it comes to God's presence -- God with us -- there is no "out of season."

God is with us, church, at all times. God is with us in all places. God is with us in every moment and every experience. In the midst of our days, in the mess of this life, in the moments of loneliness or tension or conflict or fear, God is with us. Because, as the gospel tells us, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (John 1:1, 14, NRSV).

So today, we celebrate, pure and simple. We celebrate the Word that became flesh and lived among us. We celebrate the One who is called Immanuel, "God with us." We celebrate the truth that gives us joy not only on Christmas Day, but also the other 364 days of the year, too. We celebrate what's true at Christmas in December or Christmas in July. Our God is with us. Thanks be to God.