

Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-20

Christmas is one of those times when a preacher looks at the lessons, and thinks, well—this story is pretty self-explanatory. And they've heard this so many times. They know this stuff. And I think that's the catch. We've heard this story of Mary, and Joseph, and the angels and the shepherds, and the baby in the manger all of our lives, in one way or another. We can tend to take it for granted, and think we know all about it. We can romanticize it, too. For instance, the art that is produced of the Holy Family tends to be very sweet. Or very holy and surrounded by celestial light and haloes. Because of this it's easy to forget that the whole point of this Christmas celebration is Incarnation. That is "enfleshment" that God came into the world as a being "in carne," or in flesh.

God isn't just an all-powerful being "out there somewhere," but that God came into the world as one of the most powerLESS beings that God could have chosen. A human infant: completely dependent, and largely oblivious at birth. Not only that, but an impoverished human infant, so there isn't even money to offset the difficulties of life. Not only that, but an oppressed, poor, human infant, living in a country occupied by a tyrannical empire. Luke's gospel doesn't mention the census for no reason; he reminds us that Joseph and Mary were going on the long trip to Bethlehem, at this extremely inconvenient time, so that they could be taxed. In fact, if we look with new eyes, we can see in the Gospel stories of Jesus' birth that there's really nothing pretty about the first Christmas. So why did God choose to come to us this way?

Perhaps it's because the best way for us to understand spiritual things is to have them presented in physical, material form. It's so hard for us to understand it otherwise. It helps to be able to see things, and to touch them. So God became human, and lived with us. Because of that we can empathize with the experience of Jesus being helpless as an infant—being hungry, being cold or hot, being snuggled or sung to.

Crying inconsolably. In being Jesus, God chose to have parents, and siblings, and the complex relationships that that entails. The mystery we celebrate at Christmas is saying that the Divine has chosen to take on flesh in the world, focused in the tiny package of the baby Jesus.

It's also worth remembering that God took on flesh in a dangerous world. Mary and Joseph were not safe, not rich, but living at the edge, maybe even at the bottom of society. Maybe they were living among those among whom we aren't comfortable looking for God, where we don't expect God. But Jesus is showing us that God is there—God is on the margins, God is at the bottom. God is all around us, all the time. As Richard Rohr says, “the holy rests in every single thing...instead of saying that God came *into* the world through Jesus, maybe it would be better to say that Jesus came *out of* an already Christ-soaked world.”

The story of Christmas is that God walks in profound solidarity with us, sharing our suffering, sharing our hopes and happiness. Remember Emmanuel means “God with us.” So Christmas shows that Emmanuel is our constant reality. Jesus is God's way of saying that the Divine is present in humanity. So we can look for the face of Christ in everyone. And we can BE the face of Christ to everyone.

What would that look like for you? How are you Christlike? How are you Emmanuel? As we celebrate the birth of Jesus, let's embrace the reality of God with us.

Amen

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