

Here I Am. Contemplate Me. Introduction to the Incarnation

Where is God?

This question is as much the rhetorical query of the strident materialist as it is the sincere cry of the ardent spiritual seeker. In both our skepticism and our sincerity, we often struggle to experience God's presence in our lives. But in answer to this question the saints smile knowingly, unfold their arms in a broad welcoming gesture, and confidently proclaim, "God is everywhere."

While I appreciate the saints and their reassuring confidence, I don't always apprehend what they do – my inner vision is still too underdeveloped. I often need something more tangible: something I can 'taste and see.'

Incarnate: from the verb *incarnare*: *in-* 'into' *carn-* 'flesh'

I love one dictionary's suggestion that the word 'incarnation' means "the embodiment of the abstract in *extreme form*." A Christian understanding of God's incarnation – the birth of Jesus – suggests the impossible possibility that what is immeasurable, ineffable, and utterly incomprehensible has been expressed in "extreme *form*" and therefore can be apprehended and experienced in time and space. What moves and astonishes me is the wondrous implication that God so profoundly appreciates our limited capacity to know him that he humbly condescends to our limitations *so that* we might behold and adore the One who beholds and adores us.

For us spiritual novices, before our souls can grow to 'see' the cosmic and universal Christ of the saints, we must begin here, with Jesus in Bethlehem, born in the flesh to a particular woman at a particular time in history.

We [first] encounter the Incarnation in one focused, dramatic moment, and then the particular truth has a chance of becoming a universal truth, and even my truth.

–Richard Rohr¹

Every circumstance surrounding this story of Jesus' birth is a signpost to how an understanding of God and God's character will unfold. And the particulars are telling because, for being the incarnation of the Sovereign of the cosmos, Jesus was born in surprisingly unremarkable circumstances. Tradition uses the word 'lowly.'

Socially speaking, Jesus was low born, conceived in the womb of an unwed woman whose people were the despised and disposable underclass of a powerful empire. This is how the God

¹ Richard Rohr. "God is Present." Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation. 25 September 2014, <http://myemail.constantcontact.com/Richard-Rohr-s-Meditation--God-Is-Present.html?soid=1103098668616&aid=6UQo0OHLxSg>.

of the Christian scriptures first chose to self-identify: in solidarity with the vulnerable, obscure and lowly. Any gospel proclamation of the ‘who’ and ‘where’ of God that doesn’t begin with these particulars is out of sync with God’s chosen self-revelation. This DNA of God’s self-revelation is seen consistently throughout Jesus’ life, which ends thirty-three years later in humiliation and death at the hands of the same occupying power, in collusion with those of his own people who haven’t yet made peace with these particulars.

It astonishes me how Western culture has sentimentalized this story, because the implications challenge so much of our settled assumptions and undermine any attempt to tame and domesticate the narrative that unfolds from this beginning.

My friend the English poet Malcolm Guite wrote a poem that gets to the heart of the profound implications of the Incarnation:

ON THE EDGE

by Malcolm Guite

Christmas sets the centre on the edge;
The edge of town, out-buildings of an inn,
The fringe of empire, far from privilege
And power, on the edge and outer-spin
Of turning worlds, a margin of small stars
That edge a galaxy itself light years
From some unguessed-at cosmic origin.
Christmas sets the centre on the edge.
And from this day our world is re-aligned;
A tiny seed unfolding in the womb
Becomes the source from which we all unfold
And flower into being. We are healed,
The end begins, the tomb becomes a womb,
For now in him all things are realigned.²

Certainly a personal-spiritual application of this story is appropriate and necessary. For who among us isn’t spiritually poor and alienated from our truest self? Who among us doesn’t suffer under the weight and press of our own egos and self-interest? But as Malcolm’s poem so beautifully implies, this ‘re-alignment’ of our vision first passes through a tomb, and is then rebirthed to unfold and flower with the healing of *all things* – healing on personal, social, environmental and economic levels.

Jesus is the *extreme form* of God’s love made flesh. Through his redemptive love, he uniquely reveals God and God’s character; he reverses the normal press of inordinate top-down powers and redeems all creation from the bottom up through the mechanism of humble self-donation.

² Malcolm Guite. *Sounding the Seasons: Seventy Sonnets for the Church Year*. (Canterbury Press, 2012).

Those who follow Jesus' way (wittingly or not) participate in this redemption, for *whoever loves God loves all that God loves*.³ A reverse formulation of this truth is also interesting to consider: Whoever loves what God loves, loves God. For God is love.

Christmas should be a time of great rejoicing, feasting and no small measure of cozy familial revelry. But if we miss the gift of God's self-revelation that both challenges and makes all things new, it's not 'Christ'-mass. The Canadian singer/songwriter Bruce Cockburn penned it so well:

Like a stone on the surface of a still river
Driving the circles on forever
Redemption breaks through the surface of time
In the cry of a tiny babe.⁴

Where is God? Don't look anxiously up... look lovingly down. For indeed, as John Calvin said,

It is not necessary for us to mount up on high to inquire about what must be hidden from us at this moment. For God lowers himself to us. He shows us only in his Son – as though he says, "Here I am. Contemplate me."⁵

³ From the song "Think About That" by Steve Bell. Listen to the full song at www.pilgrimyear.com/songs:ChristmasChapterOne.

⁴ Excerpt from Bruce Cockburn, "Cry of a Tiny Babe," <http://cockburnproject.net/songs&music/coatb.html>.

⁵ Quoted in William C. Placher, *The Triune God: An Essay in Post Liberal Theology* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 43.