



Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14

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The birth of Jesus story handed down to us from generations is one filled with angels, shepherds, and even a shining star against a midnight sky. This story has lit our imagination with wonder for many years until the brightness of the star began to wane, and together with many other childhood “truths” found its resting place in the dusty attic of our memories. Have we replaced it with an adult explanation of the event, or have we renounced the faith altogether?

There is much going on in Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus. It looks like a large-scale painting with numerous characters, cultural references, lights and shadows, foreground and background. There are military and political titles being mentioned, geographic locations, historical references, theological overtones, and a not so hidden announcement of fulfilled promises and renewed hope.

Behind the whole picture lies a series of questions: Who is Lord, Caesar of Jesus? How is peace achieved? What else will he accomplish? Who is God? Is God hiding anywhere? Is God easy to be found? What difference will God make to the life of the people?

The mystery we celebrate at Christmas is that the divine has chosen its hiding place in the world. Reflecting on God’s creative act in the Book of Genesis, the gospel of John announces, In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be.¹ Fr. Rohr thus comments:

When Christians hear the word “incarnation,” most of us think about the birth of Jesus, who personally demonstrated God’s radical unity with humanity. But I want to suggest that the first Incarnation was the moment described in Genesis 1, when God joined in unity with the physical universe and became the light inside of everything. This, I believe, is why light is the subject of the first day of creation.

The Incarnation, then, is not only “God becoming Jesus.” It is a much broader event, which is why John first describes God’s presence in the general word “flesh” (John 1:14). John is speaking of the ubiquitous Christ we continue to encounter in other human beings, a mountain, a blade of grass, or a starling.

“Christ” is a word for the Primordial Template (Logos or Word) through whom “all things came into being, and not one thing had its being except through him” (John 1:3). Seeing in this way has reframed, reenergized, and broadened my own religious belief, and I believe it could be Christianity’s unique contribution among the world religions.²

¹ John 1:1.3

² Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope for, and Believe*

Therefore, the only way human beings can understand spiritual things is that they have to be presented in physical, material form. God saw that the world reflected God's intentions, God's plan, God's character...and all was very good. God delights in the world and means for us to enjoy the world and find God in it. God intends to keep things simple for those who have eyes to see but remains hidden to the proud and powerful.³ God isn't really obvious to most people.

All becomes summed up now in the tiny body of Jesus, smeared with blood and amniotic fluid (or vernix caseosa), the thick, creamy coating meant to protect newborns from a variety of infections. The scene is not pretty but rather messy: It's not the scene we easily find on a Hallmark card. In Jesus, God chose to become human. But also in Jesus, God was once a baby—a baby who nestled in a woman's womb, a baby whose life depended on a woman for nourishment, a baby who fell asleep on a woman's chest, a baby whose first word could very well have been, "mama."

God chose to be born in a simple Palestinian family forced to confront one crisis after another: the personal struggle to stay together; forced to travel at a critical moment in the pregnancy and enduring the hardship of the trip at a not so comfortable moment of the pregnancy; not able to rely on family closeness and support at the moment of the baby's birth; running the risk of giving birth in the open field at night and having to protect the new-born baby from wild animals.

Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus were lucky enough to encounter the generosity of an innkeeper who puts them up amongst farm animals. Much noise, smells, chaos of helping hands and curious visitors, including shepherds and their flock are part of the picture. Soon, even well-dressed and cultured foreigners enter the scene. Can Mary get any rest? Is the night really silent?

God chose to be born in a Palestinian village, at a specific historical moment. The Gospel writers named Caesar and Herod not for dramatic effect; they didn't mention a census or massacre for literary flourish. They used contextual markers to describe in concrete ways the turmoil of the times that hosted the first advent.⁴

The specificity of the incarnation of God in a concrete time and space qualifies the divine intention to be God-with-us and for us whomever we are, wherever and whenever in time. The specificity of the gospel accounts universalizes God's presence especially where turmoil and hardship are found. Our troubled times, shaped by all manner of meanness, war, and injustice wherever we turn, cause continued suffering and death. Cries of lament and cries for peace are loud and clear.

Where is God being revealed? Not in the safe world, but at the edge, at the bottom, among those where we don't want or expect to find God, where we don't look for God. The incarnation positions Jesus among the most vulnerable people, the bereft and threatened of society. The first advent shows God wrestling with the struggles common to many the world over. And from this disadvantaged stance, Jesus lives out God's peace agenda as a counter-testimony to Caesar's peace, sharing in our sufferings and moments of hope. Amid our hardship, God is with us.

The Immanuel, God-with/for/in-us, cares for those who suffer. If anyone suffers, God is there, nearby and hidden. It's up to you and me to make God visible. Merry Christmas.

³ Matthew 11:25

⁴ Kelley Nikondeha, *The First Advent in Palestine: Reversals, Resistance, and the Ongoing Complexity of Hope* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2022)