

The defiant hope of Christmas: God is with us

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One of the stranger elements of the strange Nativity narrative is the way an angel addresses Mary: “You who are highly favored.” As a teen mother, pregnant before marriage and destined to give birth among barn animals, she might have been forgiven for regarding this as angelic sarcasm. Fast forward three decades, and the most favored one will see her son executed among thieves before a jeering crowd.

The whole Christmas story is pregnant with enigma and violated expectations. The Creator pulls on a garment of blood and bone. Almighty God is somehow present in a fragile newborn. The deliverer of humankind is delivered, slimy with vernix, in a place smelling of dung. If God can come here, amid the shame and straw, he can come anywhere. If God came here, he has come everywhere.

As we pull back from these events, an odd violation of perspective kicks in. The largest figures of the time — King Herod, Emperor Tiberius — grow smaller. The smaller figures — Mary, Joseph and some random shepherds — loom large. The smallest, most helpless figure blots out sun and moon and fills the whole sky with song: “Glory to God in the highest. Peace on Earth. Good will toward men.”

Many in first-century Palestine — as in every time since — were looking for political deliverance. They had every right to resent the brutal rule of Rome and its proxies. But the Christmas story overturns that expectation. It asserts that the most important things — the things that last and count — are not political or social but personal and human. Instead of influence based on coercion, the birth of Jesus points to a power found in vulnerability, service and humility. Humankind is offered not a new way of organizing society but a new way of being human, marked by compassion, purpose, dignity and kindness.

Imagine if Jesus had been a political revolutionary. Even if he had miraculously succeeded in humbling Rome, he would be a historical footnote — someone on par with Judah Maccabee. Precisely because Christ’s kingdom is not of this world, it was not limited to his time. Those who politicize religion are also miniaturizing it. Their faith is as fresh and relevant as last week’s newspaper.

None of this is to dismiss the importance of politics. We are still working out the massive social implications of honoring God’s image in every life. But in the Nativity story, political figures only appear as tax collectors and murderers. At the center of history lies a domestic drama. The universe held its breath as a baby drew his first. God arrived, not as a conqueror, but as a child in a stable. A teacher on a hillside. A man nailed to a cross. And his achievement — bringing God’s presence to humankind — makes every victory achieved by force look trifling in comparison.

If the Nativity story is true, God is not merely a philosophic or theological postulate. In the scriptures, Jesus is given the name Emmanuel, which is Hebrew for “God with us.” He entered the bowels of human existence for the sake of every human soul. The implications are remarkable. It means there are no insignificant or pointless lives. It means that the events and choices of an average day can carry eternal significance. It means that a journey of meaning and purpose — a life of courage and generosity — can begin from whatever desolate place we find ourselves.

This emphasis on the personal — this glorification of the human — has sometimes been captured in art. Consider the luminous domestic spaces of Vermeer. A milkmaid, a lacemaker or a geographer shines with dignity and grace. A girl with a pearl earring and limpid eyes is as radiant as a Madonna.

Or consider James Wright's brief poem "Trouble," dealing with a young woman named Roberta who is pregnant out of wedlock. She is taunted on the street by a boy, Crum Anderson, who says she looks like she has swallowed a watermelon. The poem continues:

Fat? Willow and lonesome Roberta, running

Alone down Pearl Street in the rain the last time

I ever saw her, smiling a smile

Crum Anderson will never know,

Wondering at her body.

Sixteen years, and

All that time she thought she was nothing

But skin and bones.

None of us — no matter what Crum Anderson says — is merely skin and bones. We are skin and bones and the life of God within us. Even lives that feel relentlessly ordinary or hopelessly broken are vessels of divine purpose. We are embraced, elevated and dignified by God's astounding humility.

This should be a source of hope. I am not speaking here of optimism, which is more like a genetic gift than the foundation of a life. Some of us, in contrast, have the genetic affliction of depression, which can bathe life's wonders in dirty dishwater, making our days appear gray and two-dimensional. Depression tries to convince us that hope itself is a fiction. Sometimes the only comfort lies in knowing your mind is a vicious liar and in managing to endure another day.

But when we are thinking clearly, most of us can recall glimpses of purpose, beauty and glory in our lives. In the overwhelming calm and joy of holding our child close. In the majesty and marvelous internal order of nature. In art or music that touches our deepest being. In the undeserved, sacrificial love of a friend. And maybe, if we are silent and open, in the sense that a benign God is speaking to us in the seemingly random events of our lives.

These are not logical proofs; they are signposts pointing in the direction of grace. And they culminate the defiant hope of Christmas: God is for us. God is in us. God is with us.

In enforced isolation and loneliness, God is with us. In chronic pain and degenerative disease, God is with us. In a shattered relationship or a cancer diagnosis, God is with us. In an intensive care unit or a mental ward, God is with us. In life and in death, God will not leave us or forsake us.

It is possible, of course, that none of this true. Such Christmas hope may well be a pleasing myth or projection of our own desires. If we had been there on the night in question, walking the Judean hills, would we have seen and heard the angels? I have no idea. But I do know that the civilization I inhabit is unimaginable without the birth of the Christ child. I know that billions in the last two millennia have claimed communion with Him. And I have faith that this extraordinary person, who knew God's heart so intimately, can be born into our hearts as well.

Such faith does not promise release from suffering, but it can bring deliverance from fear. It means that every moment we are blessed to inhabit, even in a difficult and shortened life, can be infused with God's presence and ennobled by His calling. The hope that began on Christmas Day still shines like a star and swells like a song, carried across the centuries by chanting monks and gospel choirs, filling great cathedrals and revival tents, but clearest in the quiet of our hearts: God is with us.