

Homilies for the Nativity of the Lord (Christmas): Day:

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To Those Who Have Seen The Child

By [Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)

For a homeliest, Christmas is at once a joy and a trial. A joy because on Christmas, as on Easter, it's hard to "miss." The people in the pews, regular churchgoers and twice-a-year Christians alike, are benevolent: in the spirit of the season, almost anything except a lecture on birth control is accepted as a gift. A trial because most of the congregation have fixed ideas on what Christmas is about. For all too many, Christmas is history, a little child in a crib, rather than mystery, God-with-us.

It is a delicate task to move Catholic devotion away from a child who no longer lies in straw—who is no longer a child. Fortunately for me, the community that worshiped with the Woodstock College Jesuits in St. Paul's Chapel on the campus of Columbia University was remarkably open to an effort to probe the mystery. Not indeed to solve it (even Jesuits have been known to bend low before mystery) but to cast a ray of light upon it from God's own disclosure in the revelation that is Christ.

And so, that midnight in 1973, I tried to trace the three stages of the Christmas epic as the liturgical readings unfolded them - anxious expectancy (Isa 9:2-7), actual coming (Lk 2:15-20), what God-with-us means for us (Titus 2:11-14)—not so much as three chronological stages, rather as three intertwining constants of human living.

The Christmas word has been proclaimed to you. As the Church recaptures it, that word has three stages. There is, first, the anxious expectancy. It is expressed from the lips of a Hebrew prophet: all those endless days when a people walked in darkness, when the land was deeply shadowed, when joy was indeed there but ambiguous and muted, when the experience of God's people stressed a yoke that weighs, a bar across the shoulders, an oppressing rod. But He will come.

There is, second, the actual coming. It is expressed in the simplest of narratives: a journey and a delivery, shepherds watching and angels singing, good news, great joy, to be shared by all. He has come.

And there is, third, the theological reflection. A pupil of Paul explains that, in this child so anxiously expected, so simply come, in him God's grace has been revealed, salvation has been made

possible for all, we are to give up everything that does not lead to God, and we wait in hope. He will come again.

Those three stages, the Christmas epic, are three constants of human living. Not necessarily, not usually, in three chronological stages: he is not yet here, he is here, what does his coming mean? No, in concrete living, in day-to-day existence, the three are constantly intertwining.

I

To begin with—if you are anything like me (which God forbid)—there is the experience of absence, God's absence. That remarkable rabbi Abraham Heschel (who died a year ago

yesterday) once summed up the story of his own people in a single sentence: "The inner history of Israel is a history of waiting for God, of waiting for His arrival." Such, I submit, is the story of Everyman.

I As I have come to see it, the religious history of every man and woman is "a history of waiting for God." Oh, not passively, not always consciously. But there are days when I walk in darkness, when the land on which I dance is shadowed, when gladness is muted and what I experience is oppression-God does not seem to be there. Have you not felt it? The frightening experience of absence ... the fear that God is not here ... the doubt that He ever was ... the feeling that just maybe He simply is not ... the emptiness? And even if your life is undisturbed, a tranquil awareness of God, you must be ceaselessly in search of Him: how to hear Him, see Him, touch Him whom you confess with your lips. For you must experience the Our Father that is naked syllables and the hour of contemplation that is empty, the Communion that seems only bread and the Church that does not communicate God's presence.

And far from our own comfortable experience of absence, think of the billions who wait in terror or numbness or pain for God to show His face. The billion or so who close their eyes hungry each night; the nine-year-old Vietnamese running toward us, her flesh aflame with napalm; the bitter enemies in the north of Ireland or the Middle East who cannot find God in one another; the unwanted waif who stares at you from eyes that do not understand; the schizophrenic and the Mongoloid.

In some sense, all of us wait in anxious expectancy; for none of us is God here as we want Him to be here. He is indeed a hidden God.

II

The second constant of Christian living is the good news, the great joy, to be shared by all. In Christ, God is here, God is with us. Not in a manger-that happened once. Where then? Literally everywhere. For Christ lives in every nook and cranny of His universe. He has to, because he is God-with-us. Wherever your eye falls, he is there. He is everywhere because he is active everywhere, because without him the sun could not shine nor the snowflake fall; without him the grass could not grow nor the seas surge; without him the skylark could not sing, the panther prowl, the shad ascend the rivers.

More personally, God is here, among you. Tonight, regrettably, countless Catholics are celebrating the Christmas liturgy with a frightfully unorthodox theology of community prayer. In this vision, a number of individuals (ten or a thousand), unknown to one another, uncaring of one another, come in out of the cold and, in quavering song and stilted prose, petition an absent God to become really present, so that they may receive Him bodily and return each to his or her isolated home convinced that they have been nourished spiritually.

No wonder God is not grasped, because three crucial Christian realities are not grasped.

(1) You who come in out of the cold already constitute a community of faith: you come to worship because you believe, because you have been called to faith and conversion, because you have experienced God. (2) Once this believing community comes in out of the cold, your function is not to make God present. He is here-and not only tented at the back. He will indeed become sacramentally present: his flesh for food, his blood as drink. But not out of the blue, out of nowhere. He is already here, because you are gathered in his name. He is here in the word proclaimed. He is here in your hearts, because you believe, because you love. (3) Most importantly, your community prayer does not originate within your community, within you. Your prayer is a response. You are able to pray because the God of mystery touches you with His presence. The initiative comes from God-not present coldly, abstractly, distantly, but laying hold of you as a believing

community, at the very core of your being. Prayer is you responding to God within you, to God among you.

Indeed God is here, in His Christ. No, unlike his mother, I cannot cuddle him in Bethlehem. Unlike the Samaritan woman, I cannot slake his thirst with water. Unlike the woman with a flow of blood, I cannot touch his garment. Unlike Mary of Bethany, I cannot sit in rapture at his feet. Unlike John, I cannot stand near his crucified flesh. Unlike the disciples, I cannot break bread with him on the beach. And yet it is the same Christ who is here: was here when you entered, spoke to you with his word, links you together with his love, makes possible your prayer, and in a few short moments will touch your flesh in unique fashion with his humanness.

He is here. But, to experience him here, you must cease to be spectators, on the outside looking in. As in all love, you must lose yourself: the ecstasy that means going out of yourself, to celebrate Jesus as he is, as he lives now-beyond us indeed, but God-with-us. If you do not find him here, as he is now, do not look for him in the crib: he is not there.

III

The third constant of Christian living is the ceaseless effort to understand what God-with-us means, and to live it. The reading from Titus suggested four facets of this loving reflection, this reflective loving.

First, in Jesus God's grace has been revealed. More concretely: Jesus is God's love for us in human flesh. "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son . . ." (Jn 3:16).

Second, in Jesus salvation has been made possible for all. More concretely, Jesus is God's love for all. The good news, the great joy, St. Luke insists, is to be shared by all. Not a chosen people, not a faithful remnant, not a predestined elite. What he is, each of us is designed to be: Jesus is Everyman. Which is why we weep for every life that is less than human. Mother Teresa caressing the crippled of Calcutta is Mother Mary cradling the crucified flesh of her Christ.

Third, we are to give up everything that does not lead to God. A harsh saying? Not really. It is because of us that not everything leads to God. Because of us the earth is plundered and men are sundered, love turns to lust, and life is made unlivable. Bethlehem is a plea, in God's own flesh, to turn things Godward: yourself and the small world that is your empire, where your loves and your hates make the difference between peace and war. Fourth, we wait in hope. There is the Christmas paradox, the Christian tension: he is here, and still we wait in hope.

Christianity is indeed a historical religion: Christ did come; but we do not survive on nostalgia. Christianity is indeed a present fact: Christ is here, now; but we are not imprisoned in the present. The risk in being a Christian is that you open yourself to a future, and that future is God's future. The first Letter of John is so insightful: "Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be...." (I Jn 3:2). I do not know what tomorrow will bring - only that tomorrow Christ will be there. I do not even know if I will experience his presence - only that my life, like my liturgy, must relive the Jesus who was and celebrate the Jesus who is. Only thus is every risk-laden tomorrow an act of hope in God's future: "Into your hands...." In the moving poetry of W. H. Auden:

... To those who have seen
The Child, however dimly, however incredulously,
The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all.
For the innocent children who whispered so excitedly
Outside the locked door where they knew the presents to be
Grew up when it opened....
... The happy morning is over,
The night of agony still to come; the time is noon;

When the Spirit must practice his scales of rejoicing
Without even a hostile audience, and the Soul endure
A silence that is neither for nor against her faith
That God's Will will be done, that, in spite of her prayers,
God will cheat no one, not even the world of its triumph.

And the day will dawn when that sentence of John will be completed: ". . . it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is."

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Nativity of the Lord (Christmas): Day

By [Don L. Fischer](#)

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 52: 7-10; Hebrews 1: 1-6; John 1: 1-5, 9-14

It's unusual for me to have the opportunity to preach to all of you on a Sunday that is also Christmas. I think that in all of the almost 20 years I have preached on the radio I have been able to do this only one other time. It's exciting for me to be able to preach about this incredible feast of the Incarnation. There are so many images that come to us as we think about this event—a child being born in a stable, and Mary and Joseph being there. I can remember these images so clearly from my youth, as we all do. To me, Christmas was all about that mysterious baby and presents and trees. As I get older and grow more in my spiritual life I am beginning to understand more fully the awesome message of this feast which seems to transcend all those individual symbols and get us to something that is at the very heart of what God is to us.

Who is God and what is he trying to accomplish? It seems clear that this feast is very much about God finally revealing to us the fullness of his plan. That's the image we find in the readings. According to the passage in Hebrews, God in the past spoke a little bit about everything. He gave us so many wonderful things. He gave us the law, which was such an incredible gift so we could see something about how we are to live in relationship to him and to each other. There was great wisdom in the law. Then there were all kinds of fabulous stories of the prophets and the struggles. The Old Testament is full of wisdom and teaching. But all of that was a prelude to what was coming. What is coming is always this event that had been prophesied in the first reading from Isaiah. We hear it again today. Someday, God is going to fulfill his promise. His promise is to send someone to the world in order to love it. This figure who will come into the world will love it in such a way that the world is awakened, redeemed and restored. The world will be given comfort. All of those images of the Messiah are so basic to what we as human beings know that we long for.

If we are really in touch with the core desire of the soul, we know that what we long for is somehow to have a sense of our value. We want to be loved for who we are. The sense of what and who we are is a gift. We want to be able to give this gift to the world. This wonderful feast of the Incarnation is really about God's presence coming into the world. That's who I think Jesus is intended to be for us. He is the one who comes into the world to make clear to us the nature of God. We also have the beautiful image in the reading

from Hebrews of a God who has come into the world, in the form of Jesus, and Jesus is the exact representation of who God is. Just imagine that Jesus is the fullness of God's presence in the world. What is so awesome to me about this feast of the Incarnation is that when the presence of God comes into the world, it doesn't come into the world as simply God. It comes into the world as God-man. It comes into the world as a human being filled with enduring love, filled with an extraordinary capacity to love.

This image is a human being so fully permeated with divinity that we have not only a vision of God's presence, but a model of how God's presence longs to be in the world. In other words, we are not just looking at God coming into the world in a separate sense. He comes into the world to be part of us. He enters into this figure Jesus. He then walks this earth, looking just like any other human being—but he actually is the presence of God. What is this trying to teach us? It is trying to show us that at the heart of this feast of the Incarnation we are to imagine and understand that this God can dwell in a human form. Through his indwelling power, through the Spirit living inside of us, he is made present to the world. If he came into the world, as the reading from Isaiah says, to “redeem, restore, to give comfort,” and to “be an image of enduring love,” then the extraordinary aspect of this feast is that this is who we are. We are instruments of God's presence in the world. That presence is all about life that comes into the world to awaken life. To be conscious of this does not change whether it is there or not. But to be conscious of this power of God dwelling inside of us, flowing through us, being an integral part of us, means that it is difficult to separate our humanity and our divinity. How do we separate the two? They are so intertwined that we are asked to imagine that when we exist in this world, God is somehow existing through us, in us, with us.

If it weren't for God's existence in us, we wouldn't be alive. It's a great mystery. There is no way to explain it. We are all invited, through this feast of the Incarnation, to believe that we are a strange mixture of humanity and divinity. When we become more conscious of this, then we become more spiritual. We become more powerful in terms of being able to bring life to the world. If there is something about the humanity of Jesus that is different than the average person's, it has to be his level of consciousness. He was so aware of what was happening in terms of divinity dwelling inside of him. He was so aware of the power that was within him. He could do things for people. The wonderful miracle stories and all the things Jesus did for people have always confused me because Jesus said, “I do these things, but so can you. In fact, you can do even greater and better things.” Why would the Son of God say that to us unless it were true? And what does this mean? It means that somehow we participate in this extraordinary power he possessed. He wants us to believe and trust in this. What gets in our way are our egos and their dysfunction, where we become confused as to who really is the source of this power. Once we begin to think it is “me,” that “I” am doing all of this, then we get in trouble. We all know experiences of growing up and becoming aware of our strength and our power. Growing up many of us probably said to our friends, “Hey, look what I can do. I can do this.” We do have a sense of our identity as a human being as we grow up. We become aware that we are capable of doing things and willing things.

When the spiritual life enters in, we have to understand that yes, there are certain things we can choose to do. There are certain ways we can live in this world. But there is something way beyond this. There is something way beyond just “me” in this whole story. It's God in me. That's the key to understand. If God is in us, then there is something else going on here that we want to be in touch with. We want to be aware of God's presence within us. Let's reflect on the beautiful prologue to John's gospel. If we substitute “word”

for “presence,” it would read: “In the beginning there was God’s presence.” God was filled with presence. Then somehow, this word, this presence, comes into the world—and it is light. It is life. It is everything that restores, redeems, comforts, builds up and awakens. God’s presence comes into the world—and the darkness can never overcome it. The darkness can be all those things that weigh us down—the negative energy of the world that works against us. It can also be the feeling we sometimes have when we are stressed and feel as if we are working against something. Those negative feelings mean we are working against something—whether it is time (there is not enough of it), whether it is energy or whether it is money (there is not enough of that).

We have this struggle. There is an objective struggle to the world. But when we live in the spiritual realm, we become more conscious of it. We begin to enter into this strange place God has promised us through Jesus where his yoke is easy and his burden light. How is this not stressful? It has something to do with a different aspect of life. There is stress in making things happen that aren’t perhaps ready to happen because the ego decides, “This should happen now.” There is another way to live where we are not pushing or forcing. We are just adding something to what is going on that makes all the difference in the world. It is presence. What is interesting to me about Incarnation is that each of us has a unique gift. This gift is who we are, that gift is our presence. Mixed with God’s presence, our individual presence makes a unique imprint. It’s like a fingerprint on the world. It’s each of us making God’s fingerprint on the world. No one else can bring that to the world. No one else can bring that to a situation or to a person. No one brings exactly what we bring to the world. That is why every single human being has to be revered. That is why there is such an invitation on the part of faith and religion to honor life in all of its forms. We can never diminish life or think that one thing or person is better than another. And yet, the ego does this kind of comparison all the time. We might say: My religion. My country. My race. My friends. Somehow God’s presence, mingled with our human presence, comes into the world and does this redeeming, comforting work. God’s presence isn’t interested in anything being better than anything else. It’s just interested in giving life to all of it.

We have in this extraordinary gospel of John an image of a presence that has come into the world. What is interesting is that the reading says that the world did not understand it. The world did not get it. Those who did get it became powerful. They became children of God. If we are a child of God, that means we are sons and daughters of God. We know that to be a son or daughter means we have the same DNA as our parents. We grow up to be like God. That’s the image of becoming God’s son or God’s daughter. We become like him. It’s interesting that John says in the gospel that the decision to become like our God is not something we decide. It’s not something we choose to do. It’s not by human choice or by natural generation. It’s something that is done by God, which means that this gift of bringing God’s presence into the world is not something we have to work for. We just have to become conscious of it because we know that it is already there. That’s what it means to be begotten by God.

The feast of the Incarnation celebrates that the flesh, our flesh, has somehow been infused with divinity. That means we have every reason in the world to feel the confidence and the joy that there is something so powerful, so effective, so waited for and longed for in the world—and we possess it. We want to bring this gift to the world. No one has ever seen God, and that’s the way this gospel ends. I think it’s interesting to imagine this statement: We cannot see God, but we are supposed to know him. We are supposed to have an intimate relationship with God. We are to be sons and daughters of the Father.

How do we do that if we haven't seen him? And yet, it seems that the feast of the Incarnation tells us that we can see God if we open our eyes and become aware of the presence he brings to the world. We have to open our eyes to the presence God potentially in each of us, the presence that is there to save the world. It's difficult to describe these concepts in words, but I pray that you who read these words will somehow grasp and understand that we are dealing with something so very important. Let me try a couple of other examples. One of the things that happens when we meet people is that we are often attracted or repelled by them. That's a kind of natural thing. Sometimes we think we are attracted or repelled by what we see. There probably is something to their beauty, their bodies, and the way they dress. That can be attractive or less attractive to us. But the thing that is so interesting about the spiritual life and the spiritual world is the way in which it attunes us to the gift of somehow being able to sense something beyond the surface. We feel their presence. And when we feel someone's presence, it is not just their presence but the divinity inside of them. It's a wonderful world to enter into, and I pray that this feast of the Incarnation, Christmas, will awaken us to the extraordinary gift which is more valuable than anything we could possibly possess.

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