

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Garrison Keillor of Lake Wobegon fame describes a Christmas Eve service he attended as a teenager. I'd like to read it.

When I was fifteen, a girl I wrote three poems for invited me to Christmas Eve so her parents could see that I wasn't as bad as many people said, and after a big meatball supper and a long thoughtful period between her dad and me as she and her mom cleared the dishes when he asked me what I intended to do with myself, we went to the ten o'clock candlelight service at Lake Wobegon Lutheran. My mind wasn't on Christmas. I was thinking about her. She had never seen the poems because they were too personal, so she didn't know how much I loved her.

The lights went out, and the children's choir began its slow march up the aisle, holding candles and singing... 'To our home on the prairie, sweet Jesus has come. Born in a stable, he blesses his own. Though humble our houses and fortunes may be, I love my dear Savior who smiles on me' -- and in the dark, the thin sweet voices and illuminated faces passing by, people began to weep. The song, the smell of pine boughs, the darkness, released the tears they evidently had held back for a very long time. Her mother wept, her father who had given me stony looks for hours bent down and put his face in his hands, her lovely self drew out a hanky and held it to her eyes, and I too *tried* to cry-- I *wanted* to cry right along with her and maybe slip my arm around her shoulders-- and I *couldn't*. I took out my handkerchief, thinking it would get me started, and blew my nose, but there was nothing there.

I only cried later after I walked her home. We stood on her steps, she opened the door, I leaned toward her for one kiss, and she turned and said, 'I hate to say this but you are one of the coldest people I ever met.' I cried at home, in bed, in the dark. Turned my face to the wall and felt hot tears trickle down my face. Then woke up and it was Christmas morning.

Keillor's reminds us that Christmas is not only a time of love, it's a time of loss. It's not only a time of joy, it's a time of tears.

Last week Kay and I received a Christmas card from a friend, Sam Taylor,

Dear Ted and Kay (*he wrote*),

Ever since March, when Susan and I contracted hepatitis at a dinner, life's been upside down. No-one, including the doctors, thought it could result in Susan's death in May. (We still don't have any satisfactory medical answers.) Since then we've been pulling together, with the help and support of family, friends, company, and God. We miss Susan terribly, particularly this time of year when her planning skills, her love of life, her generosity, her love, and her energy are so needed!

He went on to conclude,

In 1989 we have been blessed often when God, in the face or voice of an unexpected friend, *has been there with us*, supporting us when we needed it most. And if I find that I cry more quickly and easily than I did a year ago, I find I also laugh and hug more too. For 'if *God is with us*, who can be against us?' and every day he gives us a new day to delight in."

What an affirmation of the central message of Christmas, that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us.

Earlier we sang,

He came down from earth to heaven,  
Who is God and Lord of all,  
And his shelter was a stable,  
And his cradle was a stall:

With the poor and mean and lowly  
Lived on earth our Savior holy.

In Jesus, God entered into a world full of darkness and tragedy. God doesn't stand afar off from our world, aloof and distant from its hurts; whether they're the hurts of a teenager in love, like Keillor, or the problems of a family which has lost wife and mother.

In his letter, Sam wrote, "We still don't have any satisfactory medical answers." Throughout history, three answers have been given to the question of human suffering. First, the answer of stoicism; suffering is real and won't go away, and there's really nothing we can do about it, but in death there's an end of suffering. Secondly, the answer of many Eastern religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism; suffering is an illusion. It simply isn't there. It's imagined. Thirdly, the answer of humanism; suffering is real, but science and philosophy can enable us to rise above it.

The Christian doesn't really offer an answer to the question of suffering. Instead, we proclaim *a presence*, the presence of God in the midst of suffering and loss. God knows what it's like to suffer. God shares in our darkest moments. As my friend, Sam, said, "In the face or voice of an unexpected friend, God is there with us, supporting us when we need it most."

There's a saying about the medical profession: "Only the wounded physician can heal." That's a matter of debate. But it does highlight the fact that we're able to relate better to someone who has shared our problem and triumphed over it. And that's what Jesus has done.

In medieval England, when a shepherd died, he'd be buried in a coffin stuffed full of wool. The idea was that, when the day of judgment came, Christ would see the wool and realize that he'd been a shepherd. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, would know the pressures the shepherd had faced, the amount of time needed to look after wayward sheep, and would understand why that shepherd hadn't been to church much! The God we worship isn't a distant God who knows nothing of what being human, frail and mortal

means. God *knows* and *understands*.

How human can God be? *This* human. A real mother, real straw beneath him, real wooden rafters over his head, real hunger and thirst, real temptations, real frustrations, real anger, real joy and real sorrow-- and at the end, a real cross with real nails. This is how human God has become for us in Jesus.

The second verse of the carol, "Away in a manger" says:

The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes,  
But little Lord Jesus no crying he makes.

As a father of three children I don't believe it. Real babies cry. They keep parents awake at night. The shortest verse in the Bible contains two words: "Jesus wept." How human can God be? Listen to the sound of an infant crying and you have the answer. Hear the cry of humanity around the world this Christmas Eve; the cry of those who are cold and homeless, the refugee and victims of war; the cry of those who have lost loved ones and know that God, in Jesus, has become that human, as human as...

An infant crying in the night,  
An infant crying for the light,  
And with no language but a cry.

Since Mary gave birth to Jesus, God knows what it's like to have hot tears trickle down his face. And because of that birth *we* know that human cries cannot go unanswered, must not go unanswered, will not go unanswered.

Tonight, will you draw near to this God who has drawn near to us? Will you renew your faith in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? And if you don't know Christ as your Lord and Savior will you invite him into your heart. Will you pray,

O holy Child of Bethlehem  
Descend to us, we pray;  
Cast out our sin, and enter in,  
Be born in us today.  
We hear the Christmas angels  
The great glad tidings tell;  
O come to us, abide with us,  
Our Lord Emmanuel. Amen.

--Ted Atkinson, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA