

## **GOD IS WITH US**

Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Romans 1:1-7; Luke 2:1-20

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

Christmas is the celebration of the incarnation. Incarnation is a fancy word that comes from the Latin *incarnatus*, meaning “in flesh”. The incarnation asserts that God has come to us *in flesh*. We sing in our Christmas carols, “veiled in flesh, the Godhead see” and “Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing.” We believe God has come to us in human flesh, in Jesus. Jesus is *God With Us*.

Christians believe Isaiah foretold it seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus. In our Old Testament lesson, Isaiah predicted the birth of a child who would be a sign of hope for Israel. He was referring primarily to a child who would be born in his time, perhaps his own child. His name would be *Immanuel*, meaning *God is with us*. Before the child can distinguish good from evil, the land of Syria and Samaria (whose two kings King Ahaz was in dread) will be deserted. Years later, Christians saw in these words a prophecy of the birth of Jesus by the Virgin Mary. If Jesus really is *God With Us*, what kind of God does his birth reveal?

### **GOD MAKES HIMSELF VULNERABLE AS A BABY**

For one thing, his birth reveals that God has made himself vulnerable. A newborn baby is vulnerable? Sometimes it seems a miracle that babies survive. Babies are helpless when they're born and remain helpless far longer than other mammals. Babies are vulnerable to accidents, germs, viruses, and adults who may abuse them. And so we sing of the vulnerable baby Jesus, “He was little, weak and helpless; Tears and smiles like us he knew; And He feels for all our sadness, And He shares in all our gladness.”

Christians believe that God, who spoke the universe into existence, made himself vulnerable as a child. God is not an absentee landlord who creates the universe and then goes on vacation. God came to us, not as a divine dictator to impose his will on us, but as a vulnerable baby. The birth of Jesus says to us, “Here is your God – a God who knows what weakness is; a God who knows what suffering and temptation is.” The vulnerable God in the manger grows up to be the vulnerable God on the cross. And by his birth, death and resurrection God makes us *invulnerable* before the powers of death and destruction.

Let me say it again in a slightly different way. God comes to us in such a way that we can always turn him down – just as we can refuse to take our responsibility to care for a baby. We can always reject or ignore him. God doesn't overpower us with his presence. He doesn't come as a philosopher whose powerful logic slays our doubts and forces us into a corner by pure logic. He doesn't come as a magician to answer all our prayers, *as we want*. He doesn't come as a powerful tyrant to coerce us with threats of torture and hell. He is not born in Rome where we might have had a better historical account of his birth and life but in Bethlehem, a backwater village, where the historical record is incomplete. When we say that Jesus is Emmanuel, *God With Us*, we mean that God has made himself as vulnerable as a baby for our salvation.

If we'd been there that night we would not have recognized Jesus as *God With Us* apart from divine revelation. We would witness a normal birth. We would see sweat pouring down Mary's forehead as the contractions came closer together. We would hear Mary cry out with labor pains. In the stable we would smell hay, Oxen, Donkeys and manure. We would see the newborn baby come out all bloody and slimy with the afterbirth. We would not readily identify the baby Jesus as the Second Person of the Holy Trinity or the Word by whom the universe was created. In the birth of Jesus Christ God has made himself as vulnerable as a baby.

## GOD IS DEMANDING LIKE A BABY

But a baby is also very demanding. A baby needs to be fed, changed, and clothed.

Babies need to be held, hugged, and kissed. You can't feed a baby once a week and forget about her. A baby needs 24-hour attention, seven days a week. Our ears are constantly alert to her cries. And in birth of Jesus Christ, God makes demands on us. If we really believe that God has come to us in Jesus Christ we'll accept the wonderful responsibility God's presence affords us - a responsibility resembling that of a parent for a child -- we are the parents and God is the baby Jesus.

Faith in Jesus Christ requires service -- the kind of service, care, and commitment a baby requires. There's a great difference between being merely concerned about a hungry baby and *actually* feeding her. And there's a big difference between being concerned about the hungry and poor with whom God is present and

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- ◆ delivering a food basket to families down on their luck, or
  - ◆ volunteering through the Neighborhood Service Center, or
  - ◆ tutoring a child through the Oxford Educational Foundation, or
  - ◆ spending time with a street kid at the Lighthouse ministry.

If God really has come to us as a baby, faith in him requires the kind of responsibility, action and attention a baby demands of us.

Listen to the sound of a baby crying. A crying baby reminds us of how vulnerable a baby is and of the great demands a baby places on us. So listen to the baby crying.

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

In the cry of that infant we hear the cry of humanity around the world.

## THE AIM OF THE CHURCH TO SHOW GOD IS WITH US

The aim of the Church is to show people, in word and deed, that God really is with us – not just us – but the human race. God is with us and for us. What a difference our evangelism would make if, instead of threatening people with the Gospel, we announced good news of great joy – God is with us and that includes *you* whoever you are. God is

- ◆ with you who are our *friend* and you who are our *enemy*;
- ◆ with you who are *different* and you who are *indifferent*;
- ◆ with you who *share our lifestyle* and you who live an *alternative life-style*;
- ◆ with you who *commit atrocities* as well as you who *suffer from atrocities*;
- ◆ with you who *believe* and with you who *do not or cannot believe*.

God is with us. God's love is inescapable. God's grace is unconditional. And the demands and responsibilities of God's love and grace which have come to us in the birth of the baby Jesus are equally inescapable and unconditional.

So Merry Christmas! Our God came among us, revealed himself to us, spoke to us, lived, suffered, and died among us. If we are to love, as we have been loved, then we joyfully accept the responsibilities of parenthood; accept the responsibility for the vulnerable and demanding baby who is *God With Us*.