

It's finally here. Christmas Eve. I know you have all been keeping a strict Advent. No Christmas carols have crossed you lips. You've held off saying, "Merry Christmas" to anyone. You have certainly not decorated your homes or hung lights outside, right? Who am I kidding. We love Christmas. We may gripe out loud about stores putting up Christmas stuff the day after Halloween, but we don't really mind *that* much. Because Christmas *is* wonderful. The presents, the family, the joy, the happiness, the smiles of children, the intentionality of good will. There are few who don't or can't delight in Christmas.

Of course, there are those for whom Christmas is a reminded of tragedy: loved ones lost during this time of year; others who feel so strongly the absence of those once here. It is lovely, but also tempered with some grief for many. We wouldn't hurt so much if we didn't love so much. It is a risk to love someone. The more we love, the more vulnerable we are; the more prone to be hurt.

Christmas is a season about love because it was quite literally born in love. The love of God our Father. Our Father who loved us so much that he became one of us. We often speak of God sending his Son, but that masks the deeper, much more profound reality. God did not send someone else to the work; God became flesh and dwelt among us. How that happened, how it came to be – it's like gravity: We can name it, but we can't explain it. It just is. God so loved the world that he became part of the world.

Two thousand years ago, the world was shrouded in darkness. There was a bit of light, here and there. Mere glimpses of the glory to come. And then it happened. God became flesh and dwelt among us. The eternal God and Father of all became a small child. And not a privileged child. A child born in a barn. A child whose parents were strangers in a strange land dependent upon the kindness of others. Parents who could only afford the smallest sacrifice required for a first-born child, a pair of turtledoves. Far from the palaces of Augustus Caesar, a guy so awesome he has a month named after him, far from that light and splendor, our Lord was born. Far from the halls of Herod the Great, the builder of the Second Temple, the absolute ruler of Palestine, that is where our Lord was born.

Our God is not a God of the great and powerful. Too often, such people see no need for God. Our God identifies with the poor, the meek, the outcasts, the nobodies. Our God chose for his earthly existence peasants and shepherds and fishermen. These were not the movers and shakers, but the humble and hard working poor. Almighty God broke into our physical existence to free those who had walked in darkness, to bring light to the world.

The more skeptical among us might well wonder, "Why didn't it work? There is still so much darkness in the world." That is true. The work is not finished, but it is begun. Christ has begun a good work in the world, and as Christians, we are called to continue that work. We are not to be discouraged by the task set before us. It is not easy to transform the world. I doubt it will be

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completed any time soon. But that doesn't stop us from continuing to do the work we have been given to do. We may not be called to finish the work, but we are called to join that great cloud of witnesses, the saints who have come before, and do our part to build the kingdom of God.

Christmas is a reminder of what God was willing to do to bring that work about. God became a human being. The Creator became a creature. "For us and our salvation, he came down from heaven ... and was made man." Two thousand years of Christianity seems to have taken the shock out of that idea. We are so used to the thought that Jesus was God that we forget how radical an idea it really is. We sentimentalize it to the point that Christmas becomes about warm fuzzy feelings instead of the profound in-breaking of God into the world. The "war on Christmas" isn't about merchants saying, "happy holidays," it is damning with faint praise the mighty work that God has done. We have taken the most shocking thing ever done and reduced it to a sense of warmth.

Yes, Christmas is about love, and family, and giving gifts to one another. And it is about the baby Jesus, and silent nights, and angels singing. But all of that is only because God became man. As Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians, "Though he was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross."

Many well-meaning people have tried to express the "true meaning of Christmas" as being about love or family or giving of oneself. These are good things, no doubt. But they fall far short of the true meaning of Christmas. Christ became flesh that flesh might be redeemed. God is drawing all of creation into the Godhead. The Incarnation is the means of redeeming God's creation. God dwelt among us and showed us what it means to be God. And then invites us to take part in that transformation. God calls us to join in the heavenly kingdom, not as servants but as heirs, joint heir with Christ, adopted as children of the Most High God. That is what we celebrate. That is what Christmas is about. All the rest is nice, but falls short of the greater glory God offers us.

I love all the things about Christmas. I love eggnog and divinity and trash and fudge and all those things we make this time of year. I love seeing my family and exchanging gifts. I love that folks try to be a bit kinder, a bit more forgiving for the sake of the season. But most of all, I love that God loved us and gave himself up for us, that we might live eternally with him. Merry Christmas.