

THE MYSTERY OF CHRISTMAS

Isaiah 7: 10-16
Matthew 1: 18-25

Faith Community
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Introduction

It's December 23, and for many people the big rush of Christmas is over. There are some people – I've heard others talk about them, so they probably do exist – who have all their Christmas shopping done, all the presents wrapped and placed under the tree, and now are just waiting for Christmas to arrive.

But for most of us, I guess, there are a few little things to get; some last minute preparations, then we'll be all ready.

It seems like this is the time when we begin to center on the true meaning of Christmas. Yes, we think about why we celebrate this holiday all through the season and we talk with our kids about what it really means, but when we get close to the day, that's when we focus on what God has done at Christmas.

The hectic shopping is done; most of the preparations are finished; and we can turn our attention to what the day is all about. As we approach Christmas, the worship services help. On Christmas Eve, as we stand right at the threshold of Christmas, we gather together to worship, in calm and dark and peace, and the reality of God's action moves us again.

When the rushing and hurrying is done we center in on what the day is all about. It's about God – and us – and about what God has done for us.

I

God doesn't hide from us, but comes into our world. God isn't aloof; God is with us.

Almost forever philosophers have speculated about what God was like. Does God have ultimate power? Is God involved in our world, or did God start everything in motion and then let it go? Does God care about us as individuals? Does God even know we exist? Does God exist?

Philosophers debated these questions endlessly. People had different points of view because they were dealing with theoretical questions. It had to do with the realm of thought. God was a concept. A theory. But then all that changed. The *unimaginable* God took *unimaginable* action. He did it in a little town called Bethlehem.

Goethe said, "The highest cannot be spoken; it can only be acted." God acted. This unknowable, inconceivable God, far beyond us, entered our world. And God came into the world as a tiny, helpless, infant, born in obscurity, to a plain, peasant couple. The One debated as a concept became real in the life of a human being, living life as you and I do.

II

Now God has a face. God came to us quite specifically. Jesus was a certain man, from a definite place, who was born at a specific time, with parents like you and me. Now God, who is beyond time and space, reveals himself on a definite date, in a place called Bethlehem.

The God of eternity takes on temporality. The infinite God, beyond all boundaries, takes on the limitations not only of time and space, but of a human form - of one who suffers pain and anxiety; one who experiences joy.

In the Old Testament the name of God is not spoken. God is so holy that his name is not to be uttered. Now this wholly other God comes to us with a name - a specific name, Jesus - and a common name at that. In Jesus of Nazareth God comes to us in a way that is real, tangible, present.

III

Because Jesus has come we can know clearly what God requires of us. Since Jesus has been here with us, and taught us what God wants from us, we understand in a whole new way what the will of God is.

The great literary giant, G. K. Chesterton once said that “we can debate whether Jesus believed in fairies or not, but we can’t debate whether he thought rich people were in grave danger.”

Now that God has come to us, we have God’s message firsthand. There isn’t any debating the beatitudes, the Golden Rule, the command to love our enemies. It’s been told to us directly, clearly. Now it is up to us to obey.

Because God has come to us in Mary and Joseph’s baby, we have seen the face of God, we have heard the word of God.

IV

Our good God was born into a shabby world. I don’t just mean the rural, backwoods of Bethlehem or the smelly stable, but the whole world he came to. This pure One from God came into a world of dirty politics, greedy merchants, self-inflated egotists, underhanded dealers, and self-righteous religious leaders.

Our holy God came into a messy world. The one true, righteous being chose to enter a world of compromise.

Surely God would have preferred to remain pure, to not be bothered with the messiness of our world. But God not only lowered himself from power to weakness, from freedom to limitations, but also lowered himself from purity to a corrupt world. At Christmas God decided to get his hands dirty.

St Thomas Aquinas once wrote that “The greatness of God was not cast off, but the slightness of human nature was put on.” God did not become less holy; Jesus took on the weakness of being human, so that we could become more godly. It was part of the sacrifice God made in coming to us.

V

The One who came to us is named Emmanuel. As you know, the word means “God with us.” Jesus is God in our midst. When we see Jesus, we see a form of God. When we hear Christ’s words, we hear the word of God.

In the Gospel of John, when he talks about God coming into our world he uses a verb which is literally translated “ he pitched his tent.”

What John is saying is that in Jesus of Nazareth God pitched his tent with us. God came to live among us, yes, but even more than that, God pitched his tent next to ours. I think that graphic language helps us understand more clearly God’s incredible action. It points to the intimacy of God’s love in Bethlehem. Imagine, God in the tent next to ours!

Conclusion

It’s one thing to comprehend all this, it is something else to feel it. This past week I came across some very true words, written by Dr William Willimon of Duke University. He said, “The incarnation is better experienced than explained. Therefore the wonderful hymns and carols of Advent and Christmas are probably more to the point than today’s sermon.” Those aren’t exactly words to thrill a preacher, but they are probably true.

Maybe we’re better off not thinking so much about what God has done – who in their right mind could comprehend it anyway! – and experience it more. Enjoy the feeling of worship. Absorb the Christmas carols. Savor the story as it is told once again, and let it touch your heart.

Amen