

Amazing, but true.

If the witness of the Bible shows us anything, it is that when God intervenes in human history some amazing things are going to happen. Take the creation story in Genesis 1, for example, or the story of Noah and the great flood, or the story of how the Hebrew people crossed the Red Sea, to name just a few. And although I will admit that the authenticity and historicity of these events can be debated, however, they do provide us with perfect examples of how, even from ancient times, people believed that it was in God's nature to reach out to his people, and to restore them, and to lead and guide them.

However, the ultimate example of what happens when God intervenes in human history, is an event whose authenticity or historicity we do not doubt. This event may be the most amazing of the feats of God. This event of which I am speaking is none other than the Incarnation, the coming of God into the world in the form of a little child. Imagine, if you can, the creator of this universe, the person who shaped this world and who gave it life, come to earth as a little baby boy. Who could have expected it? Who could have anticipated an event such as this? It's almost too much to believe.

Frederick Buechner, writing about the impact of the birth of Jesus on his life, writes:

Who knows what the facts of Jesus' birth actually were? As for myself, the longer I live, the more I am inclined to believe in miracle, the more I suspect that if we had been there at the birth, we might well have seen and heard things that would be hard to reconcile with modern science. But, of course, that is not the point, because the Gospel writers are not really interested primarily in the facts of the birth but in the significance, the meaning for them of that birth – just as the people who love us are not interested primarily in the facts of our birth, but in what it meant to them when we were born and how for them the world has never been the same again, and how their whole lives were charged with new significance. The exact details of that birth aside, when that child was born the whole course of history changed. That is a fact as hard and blunt as any fact. Art, music, literature, our culture itself, our political institutions, our whole understanding of ourselves and our world have felt the impact of that Bethlehem birth. It is impossible to conceive of how differently world history would have developed if that child had not been born. And in terms of faith, much more must be said, because for faith, the birth of that child into the darkness of the world made possible not only a new way of understanding life, but also a new way of living that life.

That Jesus was born in Bethlehem is attested to in the Bible. That Jesus lived in Palestine is mentioned in several non-Christian sources. But why was Jesus born? Why did God find it necessary to come into this world in human form? I believe that it was God's purpose to share in our total human experience, to share that which every human being shares. Therefore the author of the epistle to the Hebrews can state emphatically:

We do not have a high priest, who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace in time of need (Hebrews 4:15-16).

In other words, the birth of Jesus into this world was an act of the love of God. God came to earth in order that we might find in him someone who understands what it is that we are experiencing; that he might become someone who understands our frustrations as well as our joys, our disappointments as well as our triumphs. And, finding solace and comfort from God, he came that we might be empowered to offer like comfort to those around us. Or, as St. Irenaeus once wrote:

God became what we are in order to make us what he is himself, love.

That is, God descended to earth that we might ascend to heaven.

However, there is an irony to all of this: the most important event in the history of mankind gets witnessed by a few nameless shepherds. For in those times of poor pay, shepherds were thought to be outcasts and ritually unclean. The laws prevented Jews from buying wool, meat or milk from them. Shepherds were not even allowed to serve as witnesses in court, and so why allow them to witness the most important birth in history? Perhaps God was smiling just a bit when he sent his angels to announce the birth of his Son to those despised men.

But here is the beauty, and the logic, of it all. It would only be such people that the announcement of the birth of the Son of God would be received as Good News. It is not the self-sufficient, or the proud, nor those who, because they have everything, look down upon others, who would even care that there was a baby born in Bethlehem that night. Rather it would be the poor in spirit, the hungry, those who need someone to come on their behalf, who would rejoice to know that Immanuel, God-with-us, has come. They would care, because they would know that the Christ-child has come for them.

God came for them in the form of a little child, and he came for us. And this is our Good News, that the babe who was born in that ordinary stable in that ordinary city of Bethlehem, can be born again within each of us. And, knowing this, we can join our voices with the angels and archangels and sing this hymn to the glory and praise of his name: *Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Hosts: Heaven and earth are full of thy glory. Glory be to thee, O Lord most High.* I wish each of you a very Merry Christmas. God bless you. Amen.