

Christmas, 2010

A few years ago a young man who was attending college shared his experience of working in the barn of his uncle's sheep farm in southeast Iowa. As he was cleaning the sheep pens amid the baying of the sheep, the smell, and shivering from the chill blowing through the barn his thoughts turned to the story of the birth of Jesus. "I realized" he said, "that a setting much like this was the way in which Jesus entered the world." I asked him, "What insight about Christmas did you take away from your experience?" He replied, "Scandalized and awed. Scandalized that God would choose to come into the world and be born in a noisy, smelly, drafty place like this, helpless and vulnerable. Awed, realizing that God loved me so much that he would go to such an extreme to show it."

The mystery of the Incarnation turns our preconceived notions of God upside down. That the One who is "Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace" whose dominion is "vast and forever peaceful" we have no problem professing. After all, that is what we want, and expect, God to be: strong, wise, all-knowing, a divine force to be contended with; distant, the unmoved mover, reigning in highest heaven above the cares, trials and tragedies of this world. With such a God not only do we know God's place, we know our own, an awesome God.

Christmas proclaims that God, losing nothing that comprises an eternal being, the "maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen"; whose Son, his eternal self-expression, "eternally begotten, one in being with the Father" chose to enter human history not in power and majesty, but in vulnerability, poverty and powerlessness. The scandal of Christmas.

It isn't easy to feel and understand this descending way of God in the person of his Son, Jesus. Every fiber of our being rebels against it. It just isn't the way the world works. To the mighty go the spoils. But descending to a state of poverty: physical, emotional, spiritual; becoming poor with the poor, that we don't want to do, much less

imagine God doing. We expend great energy, and wealth, erecting defense systems of all kinds: military, economic, political, personal, and spiritual to protect ourselves from being caught with our “guard down”; exposed, vulnerable, poor and powerless. Yet, vulnerability, poverty and powerlessness **is** the way Jesus chose to come into the world, who or what is more powerless and helpless than a baby? and, the way he tells us must be our way to come to him and his Father. “Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like a child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (cf. *Mt.* 18:3,4).

Christmas proclaims God came to show us his love by embracing us in powerlessness. Christmas is God saying to us “I love you with an everlasting love.” We are the Beloved, not because we did anything, not because we proved ourselves, flexed our power. God loves us unconditionally. And in this love we are sent to say, in the midst of our life, “Yes, God, I love you, too.”

Just as God loves us, it’s very important that we love God in the world. If God is born as a little baby, God cannot walk or speak unless someone teaches God. That’s the story of Jesus, who needs human beings in order to grow. God is saying, “I want to be weak so you can love me. What better way to help you respond to my love than becoming weak so that you can care for me?” God becomes a baby in a manger, a stumbling God who falls at the cross, who dies for us, and who is totally in need of love. God does this so that we can get close. God who loves us is a God who becomes vulnerable, poor, powerless—dependent in the manger and dependent on the cross, a God who basically is saying, “Are you there for me?” (Henri Nouwen, *Jesus: A Gospel*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001.)

“The grace of God has appeared” (Titus 2:11); “the Word has become flesh and made his dwelling among us” (Jn. 1:15). O Come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!

Christmas blessings to all of you!