

It All Begins at the Manger

In his book entitled Rumours of Another World, Philip Yancey tells a story which grew out of his church's baby-sitting ministry to young mothers. Periodically, his church schedules what they call "Mom's Night Out," with free babysitting for single mothers who need a night off or for mothers who want to spend a private evening with their husbands. On one occasion his pastor's wife took advantage of this service to enjoy a night out with her husband, and their three-year-old son was left with a babysitter from their church. When they returned later that evening to pick up their son, and asked the babysitter about her experience with their son, the babysitter related the following. She said, "We played a game in which I asked your son, 'what is mommy's favorite thing to do with you?'" His three-year-old response, based on much experience was: "clean me up. Mommy's favorite thing to do with me is to clean me up." *

The pastor told the story from the pulpit the following Sunday with the following correction. "In truth . . . that isn't Susan's favourite thing to do with her son. Cleaning him up is an excuse to hold him. Absorbing the mess is just part of the process of getting close." Then the pastor made the following application: "And it's the same with God."

I hope you understand: Christmas is often a warm and wonderful time for us, but it was not so for God. Jesus did not enjoy the prickly straw in the manger, or taking on the limitations, sufferings, and vulnerabilities of human flesh. Nor did He enjoy Hanging from nails on a cross. He did not enjoy being rejected, verbally abused and brutally tortured and killed. We must also understand that Jesus takes no pleasure in shouldering our failure and sin. He gets no reward from our guilt and self-loathing. There's nothing pretty about absorbing and cleaning up our mess, but if that's what it takes to bring us into His embrace; well then, He'll do it gladly.

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Hebrews 12:2 tells us about Jesus, "the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame . . ." The joy set before Him is the joy of being able to hold us close and to bring us without spot or blemish into the presence of His Father in Heaven. In Mark 10:45, Jesus says: "For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." He ministered to be close to us and gave His life to draw us close to Him. He doesn't enjoy cleaning up our messes but He loves to draw us close.

Did you ever stop to wonder about God's strange entrance into the world? I mean at least in the short run, it wasn't very effective. If the idea was to make a splash and get man's attention, the birth of a baby in a cow shed in an obscure corner of a small village in Palestine was hardly the way to do it. In fact, almost no one even noticed. The only ones who noticed were a few shepherds tending their sheep on the Judean hillside and some stargazers in Persia. Most of the world didn't have a clue that anything was happening, and didn't care. Sure, the shepherds went out and told the story after they had seen the baby, but they were not effective as PR men or traveling evangelists. There is no indication that anyone else was particularly impressed by their story, nothing to indicate that anyone else even bothered to check it out for themselves. Why does God visit us as a baby?

I have a good friend who is not particularly fond of Christmas. He doesn't put much stock in the stories about Jesus' birth as told by Matthew and Luke and prefers the Gospels of Mark and John, in that they present Jesus only as an adult. My friend isn't exactly Ebenezer Scrooge, but he doesn't like the all the fuss about Christmas. He particularly doesn't like the sentimentality associated with the holiday. I think he thinks the whole thing is weak-minded, theologically suspect, and spiritually bankrupt.

And, on the one hand, I appreciate my friend's skepticism; it warns me not to confuse truth with legend.

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On the other hand, I feel sorry for my friend. I think something bad must have happened to him as a child; maybe he wanted something very badly for Christmas and was disappointed. His belief in Santa Claus was stolen from him way too soon. I feel sorry for anyone who cannot appreciate the mystery and the magic of Christmas. I feel sorry for anyone whose heart is not warmed, who feels no motivation to give, who sheds no tears of joy—sorry for anyone who misses the romance and wonder of Christmas.

It seems to me that anyone who misses all of this misses the point. Christmas is, after all, a love story. At first it reads like a human love story: Joseph and Mary pledged to be married to each other. Then their love is put to the test by Mary's unexplainable pregnancy and confirmed by Joseph's willingness, against all odds and all reason, to receive it as a gift from God. Later, the love story is taken to a higher level, and we are told: "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

You see, Christmas is supposed to touch our hearts and engage our emotions. Christmas is meant to get under our rational defenses and change us from the inside out. It's supposed to soften us up, make us more childlike, make us more receptive and attuned to the presence of God among us, and persuade us to be loved and to love. We are after all saved by faith not by sight. God catches us off guard with the manger and means to. Soften my heart Lord Jesus!

A second reason God comes to the manger is that He desires to remind us that God is not in league with or impressed by the rich and powerful of this world. The kings of the world, as illustrated in the wise men, will come and bow down to Him not the other way around. By the same token humble shepherds, carpenters, and humble housewives are given the star roles in His epic story. The

poor, who would never dare enter a palace are made to feel at home and welcomed in the stable.

Christmas is pictured as the beginning of the fulfillment of Isaiah's vision outlined in Isaiah 9:2-4; 6-7: Isaiah says, "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. Thou hast multiplied the nation, and not increased the joy: they joy before thee according to the joy in harvest, and as men rejoice when they divide the spoil. For thou hast broken the yoke of his burden, and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, as in the day of Midian. . . .For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this."

We notice here that Isaiah's prophecy is a message of comfort to the poor and oppressed; it is the promise of deliverance and justice for those who have no power to defend themselves. By being born to a conquered and oppressed people, God sides with the powerless and lifts up the heads of all those who are bowed down. He restores dignity to those who have been humiliated, hope to those who have lived in despair. The manger in Bethlehem encourages us that God will enter the humblest of places and into our hearts, if only we will prepare Him room. Come into my heart, Lord Jesus!

God comes to the manger to soften our hearts and to proclaim his love for all who will humble themselves before Him. Finally, it seems to me this morning that God comes to the manger to lure us in—live bait—in God's fishing expedition for men. The Bible tells us that He came "to seek and to save that which was lost." The Bible tells us

that He appointed apostles with the promise to make them "fishers of men." But before God sent the apostles out to fish He came fishing for them. Before God sends us out to fish for others, He comes fishing for us. The babe in the manger lures us in.

If you were here last Sunday you saw this very thing in action. There was a beautiful little skit, unscripted, unrehearsed, completely unplanned by any of our leaders. The little drama took place between the nursery presentation and the Junior Church presentation. The star of this drama was McKenzie Closson. Perhaps you remember the scene. The toddlers had finished their "Merry Christmas" greetings and the nursery workers were shooing them off the stage. Some of the hammier ones were competing to get one last turn at the microphone.

McKenzie's attention, however, was not drawn to the microphone. McKenzie noticed the figure of the baby Jesus all alone in the stable. The baby looked vulnerable and alone. McKenzie was drawn into the stable and came out carrying the baby. Everybody thought it was cute and the nursery workers quickly persuaded McKenzie to give the baby back. And to McKenzie's credit and to the credit of her parents, she relinquished the baby doll without a fuss.

But before the grown-ups saw what was going on and corrected McKenzie's innocent mistake, I got the message. God had baited the hook and McKenzie had taken the bait. She held the baby Jesus close to her heart, loved the treasure she had found; and in real life, He loves her back.

You see He invites us to hold and nurture Him so He can hold, nurture, and heal us. He invites us to catch Him so that He can catch us and give us everlasting life. He comes from heaven to earth to bring us back to heaven. It all begins at the manger.

Philip Yancey, Rumours of Another World,
p. 157, Zondevan, © 2003 by SCCT

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Sermon for December 16, 2007
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Matthew 1:20-21; Luke 2:1-7

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