

Imagine yourselves as shepherds on a country hillside 2000 years ago. It's night, dark and cold. Your fellow shepherds are asleep; it's your turn to watch. The sheep rustle and bleat softly. The heavens sing with stars, but you're not really paying attention. You're drowsy. You've seen it all so many times before. It's a night like any other. Until suddenly it isn't! An angel appears in a blaze of glory, shouting:

“Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.”

“Do not be afraid.” Yeah, right! You are wide awake now, quaking in your sandals, as are all your fellow shepherds. Then this massive angel choir shows up excitedly proclaiming: “Glory to God in the highest! Peace and goodwill to humanity on earth!”

What is going on here? What is it about this particular birth occurring in the humblest of circumstances that provokes such a heavenly uproar? What is it about this particular baby that causes shepherds to leave their sheep and rush to greet him? Why is it that millennia later, we still celebrate the Advent of this birth with eager expectation?

Incarnation, a central doctrine of the Christian faith, asserts that Jesus Christ was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus the babe those shepherds encountered in a Bethlehem manger was both fully divine and fully human. As St. Paul puts so beautifully it in Philippians 2, Jesus, “. . . though he was in the form of God, 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.”

But *why* would Infinite Consciousness willingly accept the constriction and limitation of human form? *Why?* This is a great mystery. That angelic chorus all those years ago announced Jesus had arrived on the planet to bring salvation, peace, and divine goodwill to all. Jesus answered the “*Why?*” question thus: “God so loved the world that he gave his son.”

There are a number of ideas about specifically how the Incarnation of Jesus manifests God's love for the world. One view is that God created a perfect world, but that human beings messed it up right away by violating God's instructions, resulting in pain, sorrow, struggle, violence, destruction, and death. God still loved us and helped us out here and there, but couldn't justly override the consequences of our rebellion. We sacrificed animals to atone for our sins, but that didn't really solve the problem for long. So God came among us in human form, lived a perfect life, and died in our place to atone for the sin of the world, thus freeing us from bondage by giving us peace with God.

Another view is that God planned from the beginning to reveal eternal glory in Christ. According to this view, Adam and Eve didn't fall *from* grace but *into* grace. Their fault became the backdrop against which divine love could be gloriously revealed.

Is it possible to look at God's love through Christ in a light other than that of fall and redemption? Is it possible the world in which we find ourselves as humans is not a mistake or a result of failure or a mess made of God's perfect creation?

Imagine for a moment a realm of infinite bliss—no limitations, painful consequences, sharp edges, or death. Could divine Love be expressed in this realm? Certainly. It sounds a bit like heaven. But now let's think about our own lives. We experience all sorts of limitations: physical, social, financial. Things do not always go as we'd prefer. Our choices bear consequences that are not always pleasant. We bump up against sharp edges all the time, often in the form of other humans who don't agree with us or won't do what we want. And of course death waits in the shadows, stealing away dreams, hopes, loved ones, eventually putting an end to our earthly existence whether we like it or not. What did it cost Jesus to love the world under these conditions? What did he gain by loving as he did?

The Incarnation of Jesus is a profound witness to God's willingness to fully identify with humanity. But perhaps God's love has been incarnate in this world in particularly costly and meaningful ways throughout time. St. John, in the opening words of his Gospel, writes of a Word spoken in the beginning which shone life into being. This Word shines life into being now. This Word will forever be the source of life. Jesus manifests this divine light with stunning clarity and poignancy. But the same eternal light is your life and mine right now. In a very real sense, each of us is also a God-spoken incarnation.

God in infinite love for the world sent Jesus to show us what it means to be fully human, to guide us as we journey through life's sorrows and joys, and to empower our own quest to shine forth God's love in this often difficult, messy, and heartbreaking world. As we answer Jesus's call to love as he loves, heaven meets earth in us as it does in Christ. How beautifully is God made manifest when we forgive those who do us harm. How powerfully is God made manifest when our lives fall apart, but weeping, we choose to go right on loving.

So let's dial back the clock to a few weeks before *your* birth. All heaven waits with hushed expectancy for your advent. The angels are hard at work composing a song of welcome and celebration. What words of blessing to the world did the heavenly hosts sing at your birth? What words do they sing over you still? How does God love the world through you?

Sarah Bensen. Advent 1 Evening Prayer. December 3, 2017