

There is a reading by J. B. Phillips called *The Visited Planet*. It's about a junior angel who is being given a tour of the universe by a senior angel. After touring all the galaxies of the universe, they come at last to our solar system. The junior angel is tired and bored and not very impressed by what he sees. The senior angel points to the earth and says, "Keep an eye on that planet."

The younger angel thinks the earth looks small and dirty and insignificant.

"That is the Visited Planet," say the senior angel.

"You don't mean ..." the junior angel begins to interject . . .

"Yes," the senior angel replies, "that planet has been visited by our young Prince of Glory."

"Do you mean to tell me that He stooped so low as to become one of those creeping, crawling creatures of that floating ball?" asks the junior angel incredulously.

"I do," the senior angel replies, "and I don't think He would like you to call them 'creeping, crawling creatures' in that tone of voice. For, strange as it may seem to us, He loves them. He went down to visit them to lift them up to become like Him."

The junior angel has no reply. The very thought is beyond his comprehension

The last place I expected graffiti was on the door of a church. Serving as a minister to a growing, suburban congregation afforded little time to oneself. Consequently, I would often withdraw to a room at the opposite end of the building. There I was free of most interruptions and distractions.

Not ostentatious but etched in the brown door at eye level were three words: GOD WAS HERE.

Obviously an innocent gag, probably written by one of the creative teenagers with whom I worked.

Admittedly, reading such a statement in a church does make one slightly uncomfortable.

A week later I returned to my place of quiet. I needed peace from the frustrations of a crowded day. I noticed that the graffiti had been tampered. Altering graffiti occurs on buildings and bridges, but in a church?! But there it was, not blatant, but changed. And better yet, my training confirmed, more theologically accurate. For someone had crossed out "was" and written above it "is". In a quiet room the message of Christmas was proclaimed: GOD IS HERE.

It was the message that the angels announced, that the shepherd's heard, that the wise men sought, that Herod feared, that the world did not even notice. It was the message that Mary cradled and that Joseph admired. It was the message wrapped in cloths. It was the little baby Jesus.

"God is here" is the message of Christmas

Jesus, God's one and only Son, became a man. He was God in a suit of flesh. He was the visible expression of the invisible deity. God was expressing Himself in a language that we could understand. God was identifying with the frailties and tragedies of the human race. God was getting up close and personal. God was announcing to the world: "I'm here!"

God became a man. The omnipotent, in one instant, made himself breakable. He who had been spirit became pierceable. He who was larger than the universe became an embryo. And He who sustains the world with a word chose to be dependent upon the nourishment of a young girl.

The apostle John used one word to embody this revelation of God. Theologians may write long books to explain the doctrine of the incarnation of Jesus, but John epitomizes it in a single word — dwelt.

"The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). Eugene Petersen in *The Message* paraphrases this verse, "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood" (John 1:14). Dwelt meant "to live in a tent".

In the Old Testament this word dwelt and its derivatives literally denote "residence." Often the word was used to depict the glorious presence of God that resided in the tabernacle and Solomon's temple. So when Jesus became flesh and blood He moved into the neighborhood; He took up residence;

Before Jesus was born God visited His people performing mighty and miraculous works. God's people would stack stones or build a monument or erect a synagogue in honor of God's revelation.

The physical erection of monuments and buildings was their way of saying, "God was here." The power and presence of God had visited them in a place, and so in order not to forget they constructed a reminder. But when Jesus entered the world the verb tense changed from past to present — from "was" to "is."

Because of Jesus' birth, because of the incarnation of God, because the Word became flesh, we now

say: "God is here." God is present in all of His splendor and glory. We don't have to erect structures to remind us of God's visited presence. God is already here.

"God is here" is more than a theological doctrine, it has practical implications. What does "God is here" mean to us?

Jesus became a man to show us God

When Jesus became a man He showed that God was not merely a principle but a person. Jesus was not an idea of God, not a picture of God, but God Himself in human form.

Two young men on a battlefield in World War II made it to the safety of a foxhole in the midst of enemy fire. As they looked out before them across the battlefield they perceived the horror of dead and dying men, twisted barbed wire, the earth scarred with deep holes left by cannon fire. Men lifeless, others crying out for help. Finally one of the men cried: "Where in the world is God?" As they continued to watch and listen they soon noticed two medics, identified by the red cross on their arms and their helmets, carefully making their way across the perilous scene. As they watched, the medics stopped and began to load a wounded soldier onto their stretcher. Once loaded they began to work their way to safety. As the scene unfolded before them, the other soldier now boldly answered the honest, but piercing question of his friend, "There is God! There is God!"

When Jesus became a man He came to show us God. He came in the midst of the loneliness and the horror of a world gone mad. Yet in the chaos and confusion Jesus announced that God is here.

Where in the world is God? God is here in Christ. Christ has come among us to show us who God is and what God is. Jesus shows us God in a way that we can understand. In a way that renews us. In a way that gives us hope.

Jesus became a man to feel our hurt

In one act of becoming human He identified with our pain. The pain of loneliness, He felt it. The hurt of rejection, He felt it. The sadness of losing a loved one to death, He felt it. The scars of mental or physical abuse, He felt it.

When we suffer pain, we want others to understand. We want others to be like us so they can identify with us. We don't want to be alone. We want others to feel our pain and our hurt. When Jesus became a man He understood us; He identified with us; He felt our pain, and He hurt.

Joseph Damien was a nineteenth-century missionary who ministered to people with leprosy on the island of Molokai, Hawaii. Those suffering grew to love him and revered the sacrificial life he lived out before them.

One morning before Damien was to lead daily worship he was pouring some hot water into a cup when the water swirled out and fell onto his bare foot. It took him a moment to realize that he had not felt any sensation. Gripped by the sudden fear of what this could mean, he poured more hot water on the same spot. No feeling whatsoever. Damien immediately knew what had happened. As he walked tearfully to deliver his sermon, no one at first noticed the difference in his opening line. He normally began every sermon with, "My fellow believers." But this morning he began with, "My fellow lepers." In a greater measure Jesus came into this world knowing what it would cost Him. He bore in His pure being the marks of evil, that we might be pure. He bore in His sinless soul the weight of sin, so that we could be forgiven. He bore in His manly frame the hurt and pain of injustice, that we might be understood.

God is here. He is here understanding our hurt, identifying with our pain. He feels. He hurts. He cries. Jesus became a man so God becomes touchable, approachable and reachable. Often when we refer to God's location we point upward or look toward the heavens. Most often we think of God as being up there, far removed from the cares and concerns of this created world. But because Jesus became a man God came down here, living in our midst. We could never reach Him up there, but in love He came down here to us. He became touchable, approachable and reachable.

Listen to what Max Lucado wrote, "'Just call Me Jesus,' you can almost hear Him say. He was the kind of fellow you'd invite to watch the Rams- Giants game at your house. He'd wrestle on the floor with your kids, doze on your couch and cook steaks on your grill. He'd laugh at your jokes and tell a few of His own. And when you spoke, He'd listen to you as if He had all the time in eternity."

Make no mistake about it, people loved being around Jesus. They came at night; they touched Him

as He walked down the street; they followed Him around the sea; they invited Him into their homes and placed their children at His feet. Why? Because He refused to be a statue in a cathedral or a priest in an elevated pulpit. He chose instead to be Jesus. Deity dressed in humanity. God, here among us.

As you read the gospels there is not a hint of one person who was afraid to draw near Him. There was not one person who was reluctant to approach Him for fear of being rejected. Remember that. Remember that the next time you find yourself amazed at your own failures. Or the next time guilt burns holes in your stomach. Or the next time you see a cold church or hear a lifeless sermon. Remember that it is man who creates the distance. It is Jesus who builds the bridge.

I suspect that this Christmas you will receive many gifts — some you probably don't need, most you could live without. But there is one present you can't live without. The one present you need is the presence of Jesus Christ. The One who shows us God. The One who feels our hurt. The One who is touchable, approachable and reachable. The God that is here.

Do you remember Louis Cassels' famous parable of the birds? It was Christmas Eve and the man's wife and children were getting ready to go to church. He wasn't going. "I simply can't understand what Christmas is all about, this claim that God became man," he told his wife.

It had been snowing all day and it was beginning to snow harder as the man's family rode off to church without him. He drew a chair up to the fireplace and began to read his newspaper.

A few minutes later, there was a thudding sound at the kitchen window. When he went to investigate, he found a flock of birds out in the back yard. They had been caught in the storm, and in a desperate search for shelter, were trying to fly through the kitchen window. He was a very kind man so he tried to think of something he could do so the birds wouldn't freeze. "The barn!" he thought. That would be a nice shelter.

He put on his coat and overshoes and tramped through the deepening snow to the barn and opened the door wide and turned on the light. But the birds didn't come in. Food will bring them in he thought. So he hurried back to the house for bread crumbs which he sprinkled on the snow to make a trail to the barn.

But the birds ignored the bread crumbs and continued to flop around helplessly in the snow. He tried shooing them into the barn by walking around waving his arms. They scattered in every direction except into the warm, lighted barn. "They find me a strange and terrifying creature," he said to himself, "and I can't seem to think of any way to let them know they can trust me."

Puzzled and dismayed, he pondered this thought, "If only I could be a bird myself for the moment, perhaps I could lead them to safety." If only I could be a bird myself . . .

Just then the church bells began to ring, pealing the glad tidings of Christmas. The man stood silently for a minute, then sank to his knees in the snow.

"Now I understand," he whispered as he lifted his gaze to the sky. "Now I see why You had to become man."

II Fr Joseph Pelligrino

The young couple returns from the hospital with their infant, their first. The world was changing. Their lives were changing. All because of a baby, their baby. Now, they had each held many babies, their nephews and nieces, their cousin's babies, their friends' babies, but holding this baby, their baby, was different. Each of them could say that they never felt such an overwhelming love in their lives. They did not know that they had so much love in them. They put the baby down for the three or four hours they hoped they would get that night, but that did not matter. In fact, they spent considerable time just looking at their child, absorbing the wonder of this perfect little person that was now in the center of their lives.

The wonder of their child. They looked, they gazed. Their eyes filled with tears, tears of happiness, tears of joy.

They knew that everything would change. During the pregnancy, they realized that the events of their daily lives would be on a whole new schedule, the baby's schedule. They knew that they would no longer enjoy spontaneous outings, like going to the movies at the spur of the moment. They knew that none of that would matter once the baby came. What they did not realize was how much the baby would change each of them. "I cannot be the same," they say to themselves, "I have to be better, a better person, a better Christian. I need to be better because my baby needs me to be better. Everything has changed now that this baby has come into the world."

And Mary and Joseph gaze on their child lying in the manger. They are filled with wonder at the beauty of this new creation, this new person. But they are not just filled with wonder. They are also filled with awe. Mary knows that the child came from God, from the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. God has worked His wonders in her. Joseph knows that this is the child of his dream, the child that the angel told him would come. He was not the physical father, but the angel assured him that he would raise the child as his own. In the *Gospel of Matthew*, he was even given the grace of naming the child. So Mary and Joseph gazed at their child, overwhelmed that this child was the Son of the Most High. They gazed at Him with wonder, with reverence, with veneration, with awe.

Then the shepherds came. They had heard about this child. They came not just to see a baby, but to witness the fulfillment of the angel's message, "I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David, a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." This child is to be the Savior. His very name, *Jesus*, means *Savior*. The shepherds are the first witnesses outside of the Holy Family to know that the Savior had come to the earth as a baby.

Jesus was born, and everything changed. Mankind was no longer be in the grips of evil. The devil would be defeated through the sacrificial love of the one born in Bethlehem. Pride would be defeated with humility, disobedience with obedience, and hatred with love.

And just as the young mother and young father look at their infant and know that their lives have to change, and just as the shepherds looked at the infant in the manger knowing that somehow through this child the world was changing, so we look at the baby in the manger and agree, "Everything must change. We are Christians. We must walk in the Presence of the Lord."

With the birth of Jesus, the spiritual has become physical and the physical has joined the spiritual. This is a very hard concept for us to grasp, in fact, it is a mystery, one of the great mysteries of our faith. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The world has rejected him, but "To those

who did accept him, he gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in his name who were born not by natural generation nor by human choice not by man's decision but of God."

We have been called to accept the Eternal Lord into our lives. If we have the courage and the humility to do this, then we ourselves will become children of God.

Everything must change in our lives. We need to bring the spiritual into the physical. We need to be counter cultural, people who value the spiritual over the material. We need to join the Lord in creating a new culture, one where the work of the Kingdom takes precedence over the work of the world. We need to be kind. We need to be loving. We need to be Christian. We need to be Catholic.

Mother Teresa, St. Teresa of Calcutta, summed this up in a beautiful prayer she would say every day:

*Dear Jesus, help me to spread your fragrance everywhere I go. Flood my soul with your Spirit and love. Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly that all my life may only be a radiance of your life.*

*Shine though me and be so in me that every soul I come in contact with may feel your presence in my soul. Let them look up and see no longer me but only Jesus. Stay with me and then I shall begin to shine as you shine, so to shine as to be a light to others. Amen.*

We need to join that first Nativity scene, with Mary and Joseph and the shepherds, and later on with the three kings. We need to join them and with wonder and awe proclaim with our lives: Everything has changed.