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Christmas day has finally dawned. There's been so much anticipation, so much hype, that it's hard for one day to bear the weight of all the expectations. That's pretty obvious as we look at gifts scattered around the living room and wrapping paper on its way out. Great expectations have a lot to do with this feast, but they are great expectations that go through significant revisions along the way.

We know that the expectation of a Messiah had a long, long history. The downtrodden people of God yearned for the savior God would send them. Their hopes were chronicled in their history and the writings of the prophets. Like ourselves, they turned to God's word for hope and, like us, they brought their own images to their reading of the Scriptures. They read God's word in the light of their own mindset and created their own images of the savior God would send. They who had been bowed down would be raised up and all the world would see that they were God's own people.

Today's readings tell us the story of God's greatest response to human hopes. God sent a savior who was neither king nor warrior. One of the clearest signs that a message or happening is from God is that something extraordinarily good is happening and it's not at all how we anticipated it would be. No matter how much we learn from the Scriptures, God surprises us by working from another script.

In our four Christmas liturgies the Gospels give us Matthew's recount of Jesus' genealogy which explains where Jesus fits among the chosen people, John's Prologue which situates Jesus in cosmic history, and Luke's simple narrative about Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. (Mark doesn't give us Jesus' background at all.) With those approaches we have something for the biblical historian, the mystic and the people who love simple stories. Matthew's scholarly presentation offers the first of many explanations that Christ fulfills the prophecies about the Messiah. John takes us to the time before creation with his "In the beginning" and then tells the rest of the story with "and his own received him not." He finishes with God's ultimate offer to humankind, "To those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God." Luke gives us the best stories from which to construct our crèche sets. All he's missing are the Wise Men.

Because the shepherds loom so large in Luke's story it's worth looking to them for a perspective on the Nativity. Shepherds were among the least esteemed people of their day. Their profession demanded little more than someone who could stay awake most of the time, stop strays, and effectively aim a slingshot at dangerous creatures. Tied to a career that offered no Sabbath breaks, they couldn't observe the letter of the law and would hardly have been among those who could have read it. By reputation they were not overly committed to honesty and would have always appeared on the scene with a liberal dose of the fragrance of their flocks. All in all, they were about as different from the religious elites as anyone could be.

We can assume that the shepherds had no sophisticated presuppositions clouding their perspective. When it came to waiting for a savior they lacked a theological checklist by which to judge any contender. We are told that angels appeared to them, but the angels only whetted the shepherds' curiosity. Not that a sky full of angels would have been their daily fare, but that's not what convinced them. Following the angel's instructions, they went to Bethlehem to see for themselves.

They went looking for "a savior," the "Messiah and Lord." In Bethlehem they stooped down to gaze upon a newborn wrapped up like every other infant, with the singular distinction that this one was lying in a manger — just like the angel said he would be.

Our shepherds were the absolute opposite of cynics. Having heard that God was coming to them as a child born in the poorest circumstances imaginable, they thought that it was worth seeing for themselves. We don't know exactly what they believed. They never could have answered the questions necessary to receive

confirmation, but they shamelessly told others what they had seen and heard. Uneducated and inarticulate as they must have been, they were the first evangelists.

The Gospel of Christmas invites us to reexamine our expectations. Where do we seek God? For thousands of years God has been in the habit of appearing among us in the most unobtrusive ways. Supernovas and skies full of music only to point us toward something much simpler, something we must be meek enough to learn about from the humble. We will have to stoop very low to perceive it.

## **ISAIAH 62:11-12**

This reading from Isaiah summarizes all the promises the prophet has repeated. It is well worth considering phrase by phrase. First of all, what we are about to hear is a proclamation *from the Lord*. It is not somebody's theological theory or a politician's promise that the good times are coming. It is God who is speaking and the message is to go out to the ends of the earth. This proclamation has cosmic consequences. Secondly, as we celebrate Christmas, this proclamation situates us precisely in our own moment of history, on this exact day between the time of Jesus and the final consummation of history. The proclamation says "Your savior *comes*." That verb is in the present. We are in the middle time. What Christ accomplished, as Paul says, is happening and yet to be completed (Colossians 1:24). Our Advent journey has prepared us to appreciate this message. We have recognized the truth that our Savior comes somehow every day in varied ways.

On this particular day, God invites us to rejoice in the times we have experienced Christ's presence. The oracle says he comes with "his recompense before him." We have seen his recompense each time we have seen justice flourish. We have known his recompense each time we have experienced the transformation of enmity or mistrust into community-building peace.

People who recognize God's presence — Christ's ongoing coming into the world — cannot but be transformed. The oracle says they shall be called holy. We are holy not by any deed of our own but because of what we have seen and heard, what we have allowed to touch and mold our heart.

The whole of this reading can be summarized in the last line which recalls the opening of the Book of Isaiah. In the beginning Isaiah said, "The people who walked

in darkness have seen a great light.” At the end Isaiah says that the people who had been forsaken are now “frequented,” visited again and again by their God. We are that people, and today we celebrate God’s presence from creation until the here and now through the expanse of the time-space continuum.

### **TITUS 3:4-7**

We know that God’s goodness has been revealed since the moment of creation and especially throughout the history of the chosen people. That makes it rather astounding that the writer would refer to one particular moment in history as the time when God’s kindness and generous love appeared. But this is a reference to the culmination of the history of God’s people — the Incarnation of God’s love for humanity in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The word used for God’s “generous love” is literally *philanthropia*, love of humanity that we typically expect to see expressed in generosity.

The author tells us that God’s outreach to creation through Christ was entirely motivated by God’s mercy. As we near the end of this Jubilee Year of Mercy, and especially as we celebrate the Christmas season, that word is worthy of our careful attention. In the Hebrew Scriptures the word mercy derives from the same root as the word womb. Mercy can be described as a motherly feeling of caring and nurturing compassion. It is a feeling that must necessarily find expression in action, and especially in presence and gestures of love. God’s mercy is a divine initiative, God’s free, loving intention toward us at every moment, the divine quality that impels God to be present to humanity and all of creation.

While this selection begins by contemplating God’s goodness, it takes the second step of describing in more concrete terms what this means for us. Jesus Christ, God’s expression of generous love and motherly compassion, became incarnate for our transformation, our rebirth into his own life. This tells us that Christmas, the feast of the Incarnation, can also be thought of as the feast of the great return. The Word of God took flesh so that flesh could share fully in the divine life. That gradual process began with our baptism and moves toward consummation in eternal life. The Incarnation is an ongoing mystery, the coming of God until God has become all in all.

### **LUKE 2:15-20**

The first part of this story, Luke 2:1-14, was the Gospel reading for Mass at Night. We hear of Caesar’s decree, the trip to Bethlehem, the birth and the announcement

to the shepherds. In the liturgy for Mass at Dawn we hear about the shepherds' response.

Luke must have thoroughly enjoyed weaving together his infancy narrative. Up to this point in the story angels had appeared to Zechariah and Mary to announce the births of John and Jesus. Now the angels have gone afield and found the least reputable, least educated members of the people of God to tell them that history has come to a moment of total transformation. And what's the key to it all? The plain, ordinary fact that a baby has been born!

Perhaps Luke's genius is this: only people as simple as the shepherds could believe that such immense meaning could come from something as simple as the birth of a child. The truth is those shepherds didn't start out making any commitment, they simply decided to go and see. But that was enough. We don't often emphasize the fact that it was not the message of an angel or the caroling choir that filled the night sky that convinced the shepherds. The miraculous manifestations simply whetted their curiosity. Something else persuaded them.

What might have moved them when they saw the child in the manger?

Luke wove this story as a careful prologue to his Gospel and a bookend to pair with his nearly final story about the disciples on the road to Emmaus. In both cases we have a journey: to Bethlehem or out of Jerusalem. In both stories angels make an announcement about Jesus: in the first, that he had been born, in the second that he was alive. In both Bethlehem and Emmaus Luke mentions an inn, the place where travelers lodge. In the first case there is no room for Mary and Joseph who are awaiting the birth of their child. Going to Emmaus the disciples make room, inviting the stranger to remain with them at the inn. In the nativity story the baby was found wrapped and lying in the place where animals fed. In the Emmaus story the disciples recognized the Risen Lord in the breaking of the bread. Finally, both the shepherds and the Emmaus-bound disciples went to others with the joyful news of what they had seen and heard.

Luke's technique of placing mirroring stories at the beginning and end of his gospel is more than simply artistry. Luke is telling us that everything, from the beginning to the end of his Gospel, is an adventure, a pilgrimage of encounter with Christ. He is showing us that discipleship comes only from that encounter. He is also using simple shepherds and unperceptive disciples as models for all the followers of Christ who

will read his story through the ages.

The feast of Christmas is a celebration of a new beginning, of the inauguration of God's presence on earth in the person of Jesus the Christ. Christmas is a reminder that God appears in our midst as unobtrusively as a diapered baby or a fellow traveler on the road. There have been grand announcements, prophetic oracles, the equivalent of heavenly light and music shows, but, as Elijah learned, God comes in the gentlest of ways (1 Kings 19:12). We can never control the ways or times when God will become manifest in our lives. We are invited to seek God in the word, in sacrament, in community and in creation. Each of these carries within the power of real presence.

In the end we'll never know exactly what so impressed the shepherds when they bent over the manger. It may have been the fulfillment of the angel's or the prophets' promise of a child to be born. It may have been something they perceived in the presence of the child. Perhaps Mary and Joseph had such an aura of being lovers of God that they evangelized the shepherds by their simple contact with them. Whatever it was, the shepherds were open and humble enough to be changed by it.

As we find joy in this feast, let us return with those shepherds to Bethlehem. Taking some quiet moments, let us enter into the contemplative prayer of imagining the scene and asking each participant to share his or her gospel perspective with us. Then let us listen to one another proclaim what it is that we have seen and heard in the contemplation of the feast. By so doing we will join as fellow disciples with shepherds and travelers as we all journey toward enjoying the full and timeless presence of God.

## **Planning: The Nativity of the Lord**

By Lawrence Mick

I suspect most presiders and planners think of Christmas as an easy feast to celebrate in many ways. Of course, the crowds that show only for this feast (and maybe Easter) cause some stress, but we assume that people are in a good mood and ready to celebrate. We may also assume that they know what the feast is all about.

That may not really be true, though. Just as Advent has been largely co-opted by Christmas shopping and parties, Christmas itself has been distorted by the sentimentality of infants and mangers. There is nothing wrong with sentiment, of course, and it would be foolhardy to try to divert attention from the infant. But Christmas is about so much more than the manger scene. The breadth and depth of the meaning of the Christ event, the Incarnation, goes far beyond the night of his birth.

Christmas celebrates Jesus' birth as the revelation of the mystery of the Incarnation. The Incarnation is really the radical basis of our Christian faith. God and creation are not separate. The human and the divine are eternally linked. This is what we celebrate at Christmas — that the humble child is also the divine one who was present at the creation of the world and who will be the consummation of history at the end of time. The scope of this feast is truly cosmic. (See "Of the Father's Love Begotten" or "Angels from the Realms of Glory.")

On a slightly smaller scale, we should also remember that the manger leads to the cross. Christmas and Easter are inextricably linked. We find references to this even in some of our carols; read "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing" and "Wood of the Cradle" and "We Three Kings" for examples. So what can you do, as planners and preachers to offer your Christmas assemblies a richer and deeper appreciation for the meaning of this feast? Clearly music can be chosen that raises these themes. Homilies can lift up some of the implications of the Incarnation. Petitions can pray for a deepened awareness of God's presence in all people and in all creation.

## **Prayers: The Nativity of the Lord**

By Joan DeMerchant\_

### **Introduction**

In a chaotic world filled with personal, political and often environmental turmoil, it is easy to long for someone coming from the outside to help us, to "fix" things. But today we are reminded that something is also required of us. Preparing for Christ was and is a serious task, involving our own need for hope and repentance. We can look to Jesus for solace and assistance, but we are called to "make straight his paths" and to "produce good fruit as evidence of (our) repentance." His coming

makes great demands on us.

### **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you come to judge the poor with justice: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you come to restore peace and harmony: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to be ready for your coming: Lord, have mercy.

### **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** As we prepare for Jesus' coming to us, we pray for our needs and for those of the whole world.

**Minister** For the church: that we may be a community committed to hope and repentance ... with waiting hearts, we pray:

- For our country, for responsible leadership and civil dialogue among us; for courage to speak for those who have no voice, for compassion to care for the poor, and for perseverance to pursue the common good, we pray:

- For the courage to work together to restore national unity...with waiting hearts, we pray:

- For all whose lives are consumed with providing for the needs of others ... with waiting hearts, we pray:

- For families struggling with the demands of this holiday season ... with waiting hearts, we pray:

- For the sick, the grieving and the tired among us; and for those who have died ... (names)... with waiting hearts, we pray:

**Presider** God of promise and encouragement, we turn to you for the energy and commitment we need to make straight the paths for Jesus' coming. Sometimes we are overwhelmed by the demands of life and the world's many needs. We seek wisdom and understanding, knowledge and strength. Give us what you have promised, we pray in the name of your Son, Jesus. Amen.

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