

Christmas Eve. The night Christians the world over celebrate the coming of God in the person of Jesus. This is the night we tell the story again. Shepherds, angels, wise men, a star, and stables with animals looking on. Glorious announcements, wonder and awe, mangers and the birth of God: The Word made flesh, God incarnate come.

The readings and carols help paint the scene - Mary sits quietly, the baby swaddled in her arms, Joseph attentive. Our imaginations fill in the details: Attending to a low fire, perhaps candles around the stable, Joseph sees the animals, illuminated and watching. The light is low, the warmth of great, unknowable love hangs in the air. We see and share this night in wonder - this moment of quietness, of peace, of soft and gentle light, great heart-bursting joy and hope in the long awaited presence of God in the world.

But we know, living between each Christmas Eve as we do, that this night, (this scene in the stable) is not the whole story. Truly, what (in part) makes Christmas Eve so special is the contrast it makes to the rest of the world, the rest of our lives. Even to those for whom church is a formality tonight, that contrast is clear. But this moment of quiet (of peace and assurance) like all such moments, was not made to last. And nor would it.

We know from the gospels that the world turned on in much the same way after Jesus' birth. The powerful, seeking to protect their power, began killing each boy under the age of 2, making the holy family refugees. The Roman occupation continued with these local "kings" who ruled in the name of Caesar - taxing the poor and paying the rich, not unlike today.

As in those days the world's suffering continues to be seen most clearly in physical form. During our Wednesday night Advent Vespers Services this last month, we heard miraculous stories of Jesus addressing that suffering, raising the lowly. To the deaf he brought hearing, to the blind sight, to the demon-possessed freedom, to the mute speech, and to the sick healing. God in Jesus brought relief and wholeness to human bodies because God in Jesus entered creation through a human body: God in Jesus knew the wonder of healing, the feel of affliction, the taste of both pain and relief, the joys and sorrows known only to us through the body. This is a God who loved the world so | that God took on flesh and all that this means - God became *in-carnate*.

But this embodied God, as all bodies do, came in all vulnerability to this world; this world that afflicts bodies. Through time, disease, hunger and thirst, oppression and death, we know intimately the afflictions of the world. But through the body of Jesus, God knows it too. Truly, the afflicted experiences of our lives, known completely by a God who walked the same earth we do, echo the very shape and form of the cross.

It might seem strange to hold up Jesus' crucifixion on this night of his birth. But the cross stands here too. Just outside the light of that stable, the light of that star, even on this night, **stand it does** - waiting. At least one carol we whose melody we heard tonight, doesn't let us forget:

(The second verse of *What Child Is This* (Hymn #296) bring it into relief:)

Why lies he in such mean estate where ox and ass are feeding?
Good Christian, fear; for sinners here the silent Word is pleading.
Nails, spear shall pierce him through, the cross be borne for me, for you;
hail, hail the Word made flesh, the babe, the son of Mary!

We know that between this night and next Christmas Eve, our bodies will know the cross. But certain of Jesus' knowledge of that same cross, we can take comfort | that whatever crosses we meet, God will be present there too: Having come into a world of crosses, God knows through Christ's body the weight of them, the lives that bend under them, and the sweet, unutterable hope of new life that lies beyond them.

It is this knowing that we speak of when we use the word "incarnation." For the incarnation of God means the same thing tonight as it did that first eve of Christmas, as it did the day Jesus died - great and unknowable love. It is a love that takes on flesh, that takes on all suffering, for the sake of knowing us and freeing us from it. It is a love that takes on our vulnerability and very life, not as creator but as created.

[*It Came Upon a Midnight Clear* (Hymn #282)]

*[So] you, beneath life's crushing load, whose forms are bending low,
who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow:
look now, for glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing;
oh, rest beside the weary road and hear the angels sing!*

And so this night take your rest, set aside whatever crushing load you bear, and drink in the warmth of the love and light hanging in the air. Listen to that song once more, knowing that great love has come and taken form - to know us, to free us, and to usher us beyond the life we know. This moment will not last, so we linger, we rest, knowing that in the end, such a moment will come again.

*For lo! The days are hast'ning on, by prophets seen of old,
when with the ever circling years shall come the time foretold,
when peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling,
and all the world give back the song which now the angels sing.*

AMEN