

“Crawling Into the Manger”

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Script:

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If John the Baptist is the forgotten figure of Advent, then King Herod is the ignored one in the season of Christmas itself, and for obvious reasons. Nobody wants to bring down the light spirit of a party with mention of an unpleasant political reality. *Unpleasant* is perhaps understating it a bit. The grief these words from Matthew allude to we see in the faces on television of wailing mourners who lose their own little ones in suicide bombings, or almost worse yet the simple vacuous stares of mothers with empty arms— too weak from starvation to cry for their little ones. And so when we read the story of Jesus we end it before it gets to the unpleasant part...before Herod orders the slaughter of those toddlers... before the holy family becomes refugees. We separate the pleasant from the unpleasant.

Garrison Keillor told the Christmas story a few years ago and focused on the Shepherds. He pointed out that shepherds in ancient Palestine were not highly respected folk— they were shady characters that you watched out for— they were the used car dealers of the day. An unlikely bunch to be addressed by angels, much less be the first to hear the Good News.

In our carols, stories, paintings, and in our minds' eyes, we picture the shepherds surrounded by heavenly beams, holy visions, with clean robes and pure hearts. We have separated much in our lives that was once put together... mind/body, community/individual, good/evil, sacred/secular.

Christmas is one way of correcting this tendency to separate. Incarnation. Emmanuel, God *with* us: Angels appearing to used car salesmen; Christ born to an unwed teen in a backwater town at the edge of the empire; the Eternal God of the universe imbedded into flesh and blood “with a skull you could crush one-handed.”

These are juxtapositions our minds don't like and so we separate things. Yet, Jesus — “God with us” is not only a picture of how it was long ago and far away, but also a picture of how our lives are as well in reality; not separated out into holy and profane, but imbedded with God's spirit in each second, each cell, each action, each space, each child.

Dan Wakefield, a bestselling novelist, screenwriter and journalist, narrates his spiritual journey in his book, *Returning*. In it there is a Christmas memory which he recounts:

First there is light. My father is playing the small foot pedal organ in the living room of our home in Indianapolis, and my mother and I are singing along with him that “**in the dark streets shineth the everlasting light,**” and I feel a deep and quiet thrill, a tingling in my skin, for I know this season and its music are sacred and so is the light described in the song, and even the light from the lamp outside in our own dark street that shines in the frosted pane of the front room window.

That was the first memory that came to me when I thought of my childhood feelings about God in the class on religious autobiography nearly half a century later. Christmas was the high point of the year for me as a child, not only because of Santa Claus and the toys and the gifts and the tree, but because of **the sense of something greater, deeper, brighter** than

everyday life, a kind of magic aura whose mystery I sometimes tried to penetrate by staring at a candle flame or studying the frost formations on the window by the glow of the street lamp reflected on fallen snow. I longed for that time of the year and felt instinctively more alive in it, as if the whole earth in that season –culminating in Christmas Eve –**had revolved closer to the source of life itself, which I knew(...) was God.**

Part of our depression following Christmas I think is the sadness that comes over us as we depart “holy” time, and go back to ordinary time. The earth is revolving farther, we think, from the holy source of life.

Christmas — the incarnation, means that in a real sense we do not go back to ordinary time... all time is holy time, all space is holy space. In the Carol, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, there is the beautiful line: “**...be born in us today.**” If Christ is going to live today...if Christ is going to be born... then it is in such mundane souls as yours and mine.

Will Fish wrote a story about his experience in Russia a few years ago that might point in a direction for all of us. The situation was that back in 1994, two Americans answered an invitation from the Russian Department of Education to teach morals and ethics (based on biblical principles) in the public schools there. They were invited to teach at prisons, businesses, the fire and police departments, and a large orphanage. About 100 boys and girls who had been abandoned, abused, and left in the care of a government-run program were in the orphanage. They relate the following story in their own words:

It was nearing the holiday season, 1994, time for our orphans to hear –for the first time – the traditional story of Christmas. We told them about Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem. Finding no room in the inn, the couple went to a stable, where the baby Jesus was born and placed in a manger.

Throughout the story, the children and orphanage staff sat in amazement as they listened. Some sat on the edges of their stools, trying to grasp every word.

Completing the story, we gave the children three small pieces of cardboard to make a crude manger. Each child was given a small paper square, cut from yellow napkins I had brought with me. No colored paper was available in the city. Following instructions, the children tore the paper and carefully laid strips in the manger for straw. Small squares of flannel, cut from a worn out nightgown an American lady was throwing away as she left Russia, were used for the baby's blanket. A doll-like baby was cut from tan felt we had brought from the United States.

The orphans were busy assembling their manger as I walked among them to see if they needed any help. All went well until I got to one table where little Misha sat – he looked to be about 6 years old and had finished his project. As I looked at the little boy's manger, I was startled to see not one, but two babies in the manger.

Quickly, I called for the translator to ask the lad why there were two babies in the manger. Crossing his arms in front of him and looking at his completed manger scene, the child began to repeat the story very seriously. For such a young boy, who had only heard the Christmas story once, he related the happenings accurately – until he came to the part where Mary put the baby Jesus in the manger.

Then Misha started to ad lib. He made up his own ending to the story as he said, "And when Maria laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay. I told him I have no mamma and I have no papa, so I don't have any place to stay. Then Jesus

told me I could stay with him. But I told him I couldn't, because I didn't have a gift to give him like everybody else did. But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much, so I thought about what I had that maybe I could use for a gift. I thought maybe if I kept him warm, that would be a good gift. So I asked Jesus, **'O, if I keep you warm, will that be a good enough gift?'** And Jesus told me, **'If you keep me warm, that will be the best gift anybody ever gave me.'** So I got into the manger, and then Jesus looked at me and he told me I could stay with him— for always."

As little Misha finished his story, his eyes brimmed full of tears that splashed down his little cheeks. Putting his hand over his face, his head dropped to the table and his shoulders shook as he sobbed and sobbed. The little orphan had found someone who would never abandon nor abuse him, someone who would stay with him— FOR ALWAYS.

Misha has done the Christmas work we all must do— putting ourselves into the story and putting Christ into our story. Christ **is** born today. Christ will be born tomorrow. Thanks be to God. Amen.