

“Who Would Think That What Was Needed...”
The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, Christmas Eve 2005

It’s a time of crisis in many parts of the world tonight, whether it’s Baghdad or Kabul, New Orleans or Banda Aceh or a remote village in Pakistan. What can be done? What would God have us do? How is God active in the face of turmoil?

It was a cold night, perhaps not so cold as it is for those people now huddled in tents after their homes were destroyed by an earthquake. It was a time when the occupying army forced people to go to the town of their birth to be registered. Perhaps they didn’t feel too very different than residents of Basra do tonight. They were of a people looking to God for deliverance. Perhaps not so different from you and from me.

And then the most amazing thing happened. It didn’t happen the way they had expected. It did not come to pass in the social class they had anticipated. It didn’t come on the heels of a military force. But, it happened the way God intended.

There is a wonderful hymn, a Christmas carol, written by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community in Scotland. The first verse poses these questions: “Who would think that what was needed to transform and save the earth might not be a plan or army proud in purpose, proved in worth? Who would think, despite derision, that a child should lead the way? God surprises earth with heaven, coming here on Christmas Day.”

I don’t know about you, but I’m ready for a surprise, for God to come into the world in a new way.

The term “incarnation” sounds so... I don’t know... so arid and lifeless. And yet, the concept is one of the juiciest and delicious I know: God coming into the world in a new way, in the flesh, with a body. In spite of what we all know from the old carol, Jesus did cry as a baby; he felt hunger pangs, and he even needed the ancient Judean equivalent of a diaper change. Scripture tells us that he was a rebellious teenager, and we might imagine that he had all the same desires and challenges any teenage boy does. And he grew to be a young man. Jesus was human, with a body, in the flesh: one of us, God with us.

It can be hard to hold those two concepts in dynamic tension. People argued about it for centuries; lives were lost in battles over it. It took three centuries to come up with the orthodox view. And we still ask the question: how can Jesus have been fully human and fully divine? It’s a question I’ll leave you to wrestle with, because there are no easy answers worth giving, and it’s the wrestling that causes us to grow. And as Karen Armstrong says, “Religion is at its best when it asks questions.”



So, who was Jesus the man? At the very minimum, he was a first-century Jew who lived in Judea, a countercultural revolutionary who was executed by the occupying army of Rome. We can tell that he was a healer, in fact there are more healing stories about Jesus than about any other healer in the Jewish tradition. He was a mystic, a person who was in touch directly with the spirit of God. He was a sage who delivered an alternative form of wisdom that turned conventional thinking on its head. And he was a teacher, proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom of God, here and now. And the hallmark of the kingdom is shalom, which we often translate simply as *peace*, but there’s more to it than that.

Glyn Cardy, an Anglican priest from New Zealand, writes, “The word *peace* is always loaded. The powerful have their definition, the powerless another. The former define peace as the absence of dissent, and the latter define peace as the absence of injustice.

The Christmas carol “O Holy Night” was written in 1847. It was banned for years in many conservative churches, and radio stations refused to play it. The fifth verse states:

“Truly he taught us to love one another; his law is love and his gospel is peace. Chains shall he break, for the slave is our brother; and in his name all oppression shall cease!”

This is the peace that doesn't pretend to be apolitical. This is the peace that Mary and the angels sang. This is the peace that Caesar and Herod feared and suppressed. This is the peace that takes seriously the global family of God and the imperative of justice.” This Jesus is hardly the domesticated baby in the idealized stable.

Do you think that if Jesus were here with us he'd care if you say, “Happy Holidays” or “Merry Christmas?” Would he have you avoid shopping at Target because they don't try to get you to buy more stuff by using the word “Christmas” in their advertising? Where would Jesus be tonight?



At this very moment, it's the end of a cold night in Kashmir. Somewhere, there are people seeking shelter, perhaps even a young woman carrying a child. If God were to come into the world in a new way, is this where you'd expect to see the divine presence?

More than ever, we are one people on this planet – bound inextricably together by earth we share, the air we breathe, the water we drink. We are tied more closely together by technology than ever before, but we have to have something to say to one another.

May the deep peace of Jesus the living Christ reside in your heart and guide you this night and always.

Amen.