



Love
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As Advent draws to a close this week, we reserve time to imagine that silent night in which Mary first held Jesus. We wonder, like the shepherds and the magi, about this extraordinary birth foretold and marked by a bright star. We proclaim Immanuel! God with us!

In the midst of that miracle, I have a confession to make. When I ponder Jesus' birth, I tend to think that the human form of Jesus was simply how God came to Earth for a visit. In my birth narrative, God was in heaven, looking down, of course, because heaven's up in the sky. After mulling over our situation, God decided to come down here for a while -- perhaps to re-educate us or fix us -- in person. Instead of visiting as fire or wind, which historically caught our attention only momentarily, God decided this time to take human form. So, a baby is born in Bethlehem.

It dawns on me this week that, in this simplistic narrative, the birth of Jesus follows the basic plot line of most sci-fi, alien movies. For good or bad, the aliens decide to come to Earth. They take human form and hide in plain sight. The good aliens dispense wisdom and drop hints about where they're originally from. Eventually they catch the attention of the government, which captures and wants to dissect them. In the best movies, there's a daring rescue, and the alien is saved, so that it can return to its planet.

The parallels with Jesus aren't exact, mind you. Pontius Pilate didn't order a dissection, but it's close enough to distort my thinking. Franciscan priest and author Richard Rohr put it similarly: "The great question has always been, 'What is God? Who is God? Where is this God hiding?' because initially, God isn't really obvious to most people. The mystery we celebrate at Christmas is saying that the divine has chosen its hiding place in the world, and it's in all material things. And that all becomes summed up now in the body of Jesus."¹

And yet, God didn't take on human form as a matter of convenience, for the sake of a quick visit. The depth of God's love for us was manifest in a full transformation of God's self, not a false cloak of humanity but an embodiment of our innate experiences -- joy, grief, anger, and anguish. God's willingness to come into our midst in bodily form was the deep expression of love that we needed. To accompany us where we were, the Creator became the Creation.

It makes me wonder about the church's expression of love to the world. Are we simply putting on the outward appearance of accompaniment, cloaking ourselves with fleeting characteristics of love that last for a quick visit? Or, are we prepared to wholly transform who we are and what we do for the sake of God's creation? Writer and organizer Kelley Nikondeha offers this reflection on the transformation wrought in the birth of Jesus: "This is the story of advent: we join Jesus as incarnations of God's peace on this earth for however long it takes. God walks in deep solidarity with humanity, sharing in our sufferings and moments of hope. Amid our hardship, God is with us. Emmanuel remains the name on our lips in troubled times."²

May your Advent journey reveal the depth of God's love for you and for the world. Merry Christmas to you all!

¹ Adapted from Richard Rohr, "Christmas Mass 2015: The Great Embodiment," homily, December 25, 2015

² Kelley Nikondeha, *The First Advent in Palestine: Reversals, Resistance, and the Ongoing Complexity of Hope* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2022), 181, 182–183.