

Introduction

A small cathedral outside Bethlehem marks the supposed birthplace of Jesus. Behind a high altar in the church is a cave, a little cavern lit by silver lamps.

You can enter the main edifice and admire the ancient church. You can also enter the quiet cave, where a star embedded in the floor recognizes the birth of the King. There is one stipulation, however. You have to stoop. The door is so low you can't go in standing up.

The same is true of the Christ. You can see the world standing tall, but to witness the Savior, you have to get on your knees.

So at the birth of Jesus . . .

while the theologians were sleeping
and the elite were dreaming
and the successful were snoring,
the meek were kneeling.

x INTRODUCTION

They were kneeling before the One only the meek
will see. They were kneeling in front of Jesus.

The Applause of Heaven

1

The Author of Life

Then God said, "Let there be light."

GENESIS 1:3

Seated at the great desk, the Author opens the large book. It has no words because no words exist. No words exist because no words are needed. There are no ears to hear them, no eyes to read them. The Author is alone.

And so he takes the great pen and begins to write. Like an artist gathers his colors and a woodcarver his tools, the Author assembles his words.

There are three. Three single words. Out of these three will pour a million thoughts. But on these three words, the story will suspend.

He takes his quill and spells the first. *T-i-m-e*.

Time did not exist until he wrote it. He, himself, is

timeless, but his story would be encased in time. The story would have a first rising of the sun, a first shifting of the sand. A beginning . . . and an end. A final chapter. He knows it before he writes it.

Time. A footspan on eternity's trail.

Slowly, tenderly, the Author writes the second word. A name. *A-d-a-m.*

As he writes, he sees him, the first Adam. Then he sees all the others. In a thousand eras in a thousand lands, the Author sees them. Each Adam. Each child. Instantly loved. Permanently loved. To each he assigns a time and appoints a place. No accidents. No coincidences. Just design.

The Author makes a promise to these unborn: *In my image, I will make you. You will be like me. You will laugh. You will create. You will never die. And you will write.*

They must. For each life is a book, not to be read, but rather a story to be written. The Author starts each life story, but each life will write his or her own ending.

What a dangerous liberty. How much safer it would have been to finish the story for each Adam. To script every option. It would have been simpler and safer. But it would not have been love. Love is only love if chosen.

So the Author decides to give each child a pen. "Write carefully," he writes.

Lovingly, deliberately, he writes a third word, already feeling the pain. *I-m-m-a-n-u-e-l*.

The greatest mind in the universe imagined time. The truest judge granted Adam a choice. But it was love that gave Immanuel, *God with us*.

The Author would enter his own story. The Word would become flesh. He, too, would be born. He, too, would be human. He, too, would have feet and hands, tears and flesh.

And most importantly, he, too, would have a choice. Immanuel would stand at the crossroads of life and death and make a choice.

The Author knows well the weight of the decision. He pauses as he writes the page of his own pain. He could stop. Even the Author has a choice. But how can Love not love? So he chooses life, though it means death, with hope that his children will do the same.

And so the Author of Life completes the story. He drives the spike in the flesh and rolls the stone over the grave. Knowing the choice he will make, knowing the choice all Adams will make, he pens, “The End,” then closes the book and proclaims the beginning.

“Let there be light!”

A Gentle Thunder

4 IN THE MANGER



O Lord, Author of my life, thank you for creating me in your image and starting my story. Help me write it carefully and truly become like you. Come, O come, Immanuel, and help me complete my story well. In Jesus' name, amen.

2

Why Would He Come?

*Christ himself was like God in everything. . . .
But he gave up his place with God and made
himself nothing. He was born as a man and
became like a servant.*

PHILIPPIANS 2:6–7 NCV

Why? Why did Jesus travel so far?
I was asking myself that question when
I spotted the squirrels outside my window.
A family of black-tailed squirrels had made its home
amid the roots of the tree north of my office. They watch
me peck the keyboard. I watch them store their nuts and
climb the trunk. We're mutually amused.

But I've never considered becoming one of them.
The squirrel world holds no appeal to me. Give up
the Rocky Mountains, bass fishing, weddings, and

laughter for a hole in the ground and dirty nuts? Count me out.

But count Jesus in. What a world he left. Our classiest mansion would be a tree trunk to him. Earth's finest cuisine would be walnuts on heaven's table. And the idea of becoming a squirrel with claws and a furry tail? It's nothing compared to God becoming a one-celled embryo and entering the womb of Mary.

But he did. The God of the universe was born into the poverty of a peasant and spent his first night in the cow's feed trough. The God of the universe left the glory of heaven and moved into our neighborhood. Who could have imagined he would do such a thing?

Why? He loves to be with the ones he loves.

Dr. Maxwell Maltz tells a remarkable story of a love like this. A man had been burned and disfigured in a fire while attempting to save his parents from a burning house, but he couldn't get to them. They perished. He mistakenly interpreted his pain as God's punishment. The man would not let anyone see him—not even his wife.

She went to Dr. Maltz, a plastic surgeon, for help. He told her not to worry. "I can restore his face."

The wife was unenthused. Her husband had repeatedly refused any help. She knew he would again.

Then why her visit? “I want you to disfigure my face so I can be like him! If I can share his pain, maybe he’ll let me back in his life.”

Dr. Maltz was shocked. He denied her request but was so moved by her love that he went to speak with her husband. Knocking on the man’s bedroom door, he called loudly. “I’m a plastic surgeon, and I can restore your face.” No response. “Please come out.” Again there was no answer.

Still speaking through the door, Dr. Maltz told the man of his wife’s proposal. “She wants me to disfigure her face, to make her face like yours in the hope that you let her back into your life. That’s how much she loves you.”

There was a brief moment of silence, and then, ever so slowly, the doorknob began to turn.

The way the woman felt for her husband is the way God feels about us. But he did more than make the offer. He took on our face, our disfigurement. He became like us. Just look at the places he was willing to go: feed troughs, carpentry shops, badlands, and cemeteries. The places he went to reach us show how far he will go to touch us.

He loves to be with the ones he loves.

Next Door Savior

8 IN THE MANGER



Great God of the universe, I am amazed that you would leave the glory of heaven and become like me. I come to you with my disfigurement and ask you to touch me with your love. I want to be with you as well. In Jesus' name, amen.

3

Just Call Him “Jesus”

*Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son,
and shall call His name Immanuel.*

ISAIAH 7:14

It was about to begin—God’s plan for humanity, crafted in the halls of heaven and carried out on the plains of earth. Only holiness could have imagined it. Only divinity could have enacted it. Only righteousness could have endured it.

And once the plan began, there would be no turning back. The Creator knew it. The Son knew it. And soon, earth itself would witness heaven’s majesty alighting on the planet.

When God chose to reveal himself to mankind, what medium did he use? A book? No, that was secondary. A church? No, that was consequential. A moral

code? No. To limit God's revelation to a cold list of dos and don'ts is as tragic as looking at a Colorado road map and saying that you'd seen the Rockies.

When God chose to reveal himself, he did so through a human body. The hand that touched the leper had dirt under its nails. The feet upon which the woman wept were calloused and dusty. And his tears . . . oh, don't miss the tears . . . they came from a heart as broken as yours or mine ever has been.

So, people came to him. My, how they came to him! They came at night; they touched him as he walked down the street; they followed him around the sea; they invited him into their homes and placed their children at his feet. Why? Because he refused to be a statue in a cathedral or a priest in an elevated pulpit. He chose instead to be Jesus.

There was not a hint of one person who was afraid to draw near him. There were those who mocked him, were envious of him, and misunderstood him. There were those who revered him. But no one considered him too holy or too divine to touch.

There was not one person who was reluctant to approach him for fear of being rejected.

Remember that the next time you find yourself amazed at your own failures.

Or the next time acidic accusations burn holes in your soul.

Or the next time you see a cold cathedral or hear a lifeless liturgy.

Remember. It is man who creates the distance. It is Jesus who builds the bridge.

God Came Near



Loving Father, thank you for sending your Son and revealing your broken heart and tears. I welcome your invitation to call your Son Jesus, my Savior. Despite my failures, I draw near to you without fear because of your love. In Jesus' name, amen.

4

God Came Near

*For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son
is given; and the government will be upon
His shoulder. And His name will be called
Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting
Father, Prince of Peace.*

ISAIAH 9:6

It all happened in a moment, a most remarkable moment.

As moments go, that one appeared no different than any other. It came and it went. It was one of the countless moments that have marked time since eternity became measurable.

But in reality, that particular moment was like none other. For through that segment of time a spectacular thing occurred. God become a man. While the creatures

of earth walked unaware, Divinity arrived. Heaven opened herself and placed her most precious one in a human womb.

The omnipotent, in one instant, made himself breakable. He, who had been spirit, became pierceable. He, who was larger than the universe, became an embryo. And he, who sustains the world with a word, chose to be dependent upon the nourishment of a young girl.

God as a fetus. Holiness sleeping in a womb. The Creator of life being created.

God was given eyebrows, elbows, two kidneys, and a spleen. He stretched against the walls and floated in the amniotic fluids of his mother.

God came near.

He came, not as a flash of light or as an unapproachable conqueror, but as one whose first cries were heard by a peasant girl and a sleepy carpenter. The hands that first held him were unmanicured, calloused, and dirty.

No silk. No ivory. No hype. No party. No hoopla.

Were it not for the shepherds, there would have been no reception. And were it not for a group of stargazers, there would have been no gifts.

Angels watched as Mary changed God's diaper. Children played in the street with him. He may have

had pimples and been tone-deaf. Perhaps a girl down the street had a crush on him or vice versa. One thing's for sure: he was, while completely divine, completely human.

For thirty-three years he would feel everything you and I have ever felt. He felt weak. He grew weary. He was afraid of failure. He was susceptible to wooing women. He got colds, burped, and had body odor. His feelings got hurt. And his head ached.

To think of Jesus in such a light seems almost irreverent, doesn't it? It's uncomfortable. It is much easier to keep the humanity out of the incarnation. There is something about keeping him divine that keeps him distant, packaged, predictable.

But don't do it. For heaven's sake, don't. Let him be as human as he intended to be. Let him into the mire and muck of our world. For only if we let him in can he pull us out.

It all happened in one moment . . . a most remarkable moment. The Word became flesh.

There will be another. The world will see another instantaneous transformation. You see, in becoming man, God made it possible for man to see God. When Jesus went home he left the back door open. As a result,

“we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye” (1 Corinthians 15:51–52).

The first moment of transformation went unnoticed by the world. But you can bet your sweet September that the second won't. The next time you use the phrase “just a moment,” remember that's all the time it will take to change this world.

God Came Near



Dear Lord, it's impossible for me to fathom what it meant for you to take on human flesh and live as a man. Nevertheless, I believe in you. Help me to believe for even more—that one great day soon I'll see you and be changed forever! In Jesus' name, amen.

5

With God Nothing Is Impossible

Then the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS.”

LUKE 1:30–31

Gabriel must have scratched his head at this one. He wasn't one to question his God-given missions. Sending fire and dividing seas were all in an eternity's work for this angel. When God sent, Gabriel went.

And when word got out that God was to become a man, Gabriel was enthused. He could envision the moment:

The Messiah in a blazing chariot.
The King descending on a fiery cloud.
An explosion of light from which the Messiah
would emerge.

That's what he expected. What he never expected, however, was a slip of paper with a Nazarene address. "God will become a baby," it read. "Tell the mother to name the child Jesus. And tell her not to be afraid."

Gabriel was never one to question, but this time he had to wonder.

God will become a baby? Gabriel remembered what baby Moses looked like. *That's okay for humans. But God?*

The heavens can't contain him; how could a body? Besides, have you seen what comes out of those babies? Hardly befitting for the Creator of the universe. To imagine a mother burping God on her shoulder—why, that was beyond what even an angel could imagine.

And what of this name—*Jesus*? Such a common name. There's a Jesus in every cul-de-sac. Come on, even *Gabriel* had more punch to it than *Jesus*. Call the baby *Eminence* or *Majesty* or *Heaven-sent*. Anything but *Jesus*.

So Gabriel scratched his head. But he had his orders. Take the message to Mary.

Must be a special girl, he assumed as he traveled. But one peek told him Mary was no queen. The mother-to-be of God was not regal. She was a Jewish peasant who'd barely outgrown her acne and had a crush on a guy named Joe.

And speaking of Joe—what does this fellow know? He's a carpenter. Look at him over there, sawdust in his beard and nail apron around his waist. You're telling me God is going to have dinner every night with a common laborer and call this guy "Dad"?

It was all Gabriel could do to keep from turning back. "This is a peculiar idea you have, God," he must have muttered to himself.

Only heaven knows how long Gabriel fluttered unseen above Mary before he took a breath and broke the news. But he did. He told her the name, the plan, and not to be afraid. And when he announced, "With God nothing is impossible!" he said it as much for himself as for her.

For even though he couldn't answer the questions, he knew who could, and that was enough. And even though we can't answer them all, taking time to ask a few could be a good start.

When God Whispers Your Name



Gracious Father, the wonder of the good news of Jesus' coming as a baby never grows old. And it never will throughout eternity. You were the God of the impossible then and now. May your word be powerful within me to believe great things. In Jesus' name, amen.

6

Who Would Believe It?

An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.”

MATTHEW 1:20

Matthew describes Jesus’ earthly father as a craftsman (Matthew 13:55). A small-town carpenter, he lives in Nazareth: a single-camel map dot on the edge of boredom. Is he the right choice? Doesn’t God have better options? An eloquent priest from Jerusalem or a scholar from the Pharisees?

Why Joseph? A major part of the answer lies in his reputation: he gives it up for Jesus. “Then Joseph [Mary’s] husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly” (Matthew 1:19).

With the phrase “a just man,” Matthew recognizes the status of Joseph. Nazareth viewed him as we might view an elder, deacon, or Bible class teacher. Joseph likely took pride in his standing, but Mary’s announcement jeopardized it. *I’m pregnant.*

Now what? His fiancée is blemished, tainted . . . he is righteous, godly. On the one hand, he has the law. On the other hand, he has his love. The law says, stone her. Love says, forgive her. Joseph is caught in the middle.

Then comes the angel. Mary’s growing belly gives no cause for concern, but reason to rejoice. “She carries the Son of God in her womb,” the angel announces. But who would believe it?

A bead of sweat forms beneath Joseph’s beard. He faces a dilemma. Make up a lie and preserve his place in the community, or tell the truth and kiss his reputation good-bye. He makes his decision. “Joseph . . . took to him his wife, and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son” (Matthew 1:24–25).

Joseph swapped his Torah studies for a pregnant fiancée and an illegitimate son and made the big decision of discipleship. He placed God’s plan ahead of his own.

3:16



Dear Lord, help me see your hand in life's bewildering twists and knots. Speak to me so I'll understand your way when I find myself trapped in a hard place. Shine your light down upon me so I can follow you. In Jesus' name, amen.

7

Christ in You

“Let it be to me according to your word.”

LUKE 1:38

What must it have been like for Mary to carry God in her womb?

The virgin birth is much more than a Christmas story; it is a picture of how close Christ will come to you. The first stop on his itinerary was a womb. Where will God go to touch the world? Look deep within Mary for an answer.

Better still, look deep within yourself. What he did with Mary, he offers to us! He issues a Mary-level invitation to all his children. “If you’ll let me, I’ll move in!”

Proliferating throughout Scripture is a preposition that leaves no doubt—the preposition *in*. Jesus lives *in* his children.

To his apostles, Christ declared, “I am *in* you” (John 14:20 NCV, emphasis mine).

Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians was “that Christ may dwell *in* your hearts through faith” (Ephesians 3:17, emphasis mine).

“Christ *in* you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27, emphasis mine).

And the sweetest invitation from Christ? “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come *in* and eat with him, and he with me” (Revelation 3:20 NIV, emphasis mine).

Christ grew in Mary until he had to come out. Christ will grow in you until the same occurs. He will come out in your speech, in your actions, in your decisions. Every place you live will be a Bethlehem, and every day you live will be a Christmas. You, like Mary, will deliver Christ into the world.

God *in* us! Have we sounded the depth of this promise?

You are a modern-day Mary. Even more so. He was a fetus in her, but he is a force in you. He will do what you cannot do. Imagine a million dollars being deposited into your checking account. To any observer you look

the same, except for the goofy smile, but are you? Not at all! With God *in* you, you have a million resources that you did not have before.

Can't stop drinking or worrying? Christ can. And he lives with *in* you.

Can't forgive the jerk, forget the past, or forsake your bad habits? Christ can! And he lives *in* you.

Paul knew this. "To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works *in* me mightily" (Colossians 1:29, emphasis mine).

Like Mary, you and I are indwelt by Christ. Find that hard to believe? How much more did Mary? The line beneath her picture in the high-school annual did not read, "Aspires to be the mother of God." No. No one was more surprised by this miracle than she was.

And no one was more passive than she was. God did everything. Mary didn't volunteer to help. What did she have to offer? Advice? "From my perspective, a heavenly choir would add a nice touch." Yeah, right. She offered no assistance.

And she offered no resistance. She could have said, "Who am I to have God in my womb? I'm not enough." Or, "I've got other plans. I don't have time for God in my life."

Instead, Mary said, “Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). If she is our measure, God seems less interested in talent and more interested in trust.

Unlike her, we tend to assist God, assuming our part is as important as his. Or we resist, thinking we are too bad or too busy. Yet when we assist or resist, we miss God’s great grace. We miss out on the reason we were placed on earth—to be so pregnant with heaven’s child that he lives through us. To be so full of him that we could say with Paul, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20).

Next Door Savior



O Lord, live in me. May your love beat in and through my heart. May you speak through my voice. Jesus, be the strength of my soul and the fire that purges my desires from wrongs. Fill me with your great abounding grace. In Jesus’ name, amen.

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