



Surely, the Lord Is in This Place!



I freely confess: I'm a sucker for all things Christmas. If you want my wish list at Halloween, I might give it to you. It's OK with me if you begin whistling "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" before Thanksgiving. Weight Watchers can take a leave of absence as we break out the eggnog, the fudge, and even the fruitcake. I believe in being "green" at Christmas, provided green means holly, mistletoe, real trees, chestnuts roasting by an open fire, and a yule log on the hearth. While silence is golden, please, not at Christmas! Give me concerts in the mall, caroling in the neighborhood, and TV musical extravaganzas—lots of them. I like fine theatre, but an amateur Christmas play at church can move me to tears. I confess: I belong to the Mae West school of Christmas: "Too much of a good thing can be *wonderful!*"

Some people see all this as, well, a bit unseemly. The whole affair has become too commercial, too tawdry, too kitschy. They have a point. However, how you view Christmas depends in part on what you make of one of the greatest teachings of the faith—the doctrine of the Incarnation—which declares that God came to this earth in human form: "Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great: [God] appeared in a body" (1 Timothy 3:16). What could that possibly mean?

The great Nobel laureate poet Czesław Miłosz once wrote that "If God incarnated himself in man," then "All human endeavors deserve attention." If God came in the flesh, Miłosz wrote, then "our kind was so much elevated ... we should publicly testify to the divine glory with words, music, dance, and every sign." In other words, if God entered our world to vanquish darkness, despair, and confusion, then there is every reason to burst forth in exuberant, ecstatic celebration.

The Incarnation has far-reaching consequences. It means that God through Christ is really "with us." (That is the very meaning of "Immanuel.") It means that God cherishes the physical order. It means he loves material things: "We may think this rather crude and unspiritual," C. S. Lewis once observed. "God does not. He invented eating. He likes matter. He invented it." Paradoxically, Christianity inspires a kind of "holy worldliness"—not a life of gross excess, but one of exuberant gratitude for a creation inhabited by its Maker. Lewis says, "We may ignore, but we can nowhere evade the presence of God. The world is crowded with him. He walks everywhere *incognito.*" A major party is called for.

So the celebration of the Incarnation, which we call Christmas, no matter how extravagant, is our inadequate effort to say "Wow! Thank you! We get it! We see it! God, you are here with us!" For two millennia believers have been doing their best to respond to the Big Story, the astonishing notion that God came near in a baby born in a barn in the nondescript village of Bethlehem. All those extravagant lights adorning our houses, the overdone Christmas trees, the endless books and movies, the banqueting, the concerts, the caroling, the gift-giving—all these are feeble responses to the wonder of "God With Us."

Whether they know it or not, in their heart of hearts people everywhere are hoping to touch and be touched by the divine. Christmas declares that that universal aspiration can be fulfilled: "He is indeed not far from any of us" (Acts 17:27). The manger, the gifts, the Magi, the shepherds, the angelic hosts, the glorias, the endless acts of generosity—all these are sacred gestures towards the one great truth: "*Surely the Lord is in this place*" (Genesis 28:16).

Darryl Tippens
Provost, Pepperdine University