

Risk and fulfillment: Isaiah 63:7-9; Psalm 148; Hebrews 2:10-18; Matthew 2:13-23

by [James Alison](#) in the [December 11, 2007](#) issue

All of the Spirit's labor—the pruning of our imagination, the background work on our expectations—comes to fruition on Christmas Day, when we are brought into the Presence. The virgin who for nine months has been weaving the veil of the temple out of the material of her own body sits in stupefied and exhausted silence. Following the line of her gaze toward the manger, we too “veiled in flesh, the Godhead see.” The angels sing the first Gloria, for where there is Presence, there too is praise: the two are inseparable. We too allow our ears, our voices and then our hearts to proclaim the Creator's new mode of Presence among us. We are going to be inducted into lifelong praise.

We are talking about the Creator—“not a messenger or an angel but his Presence”—as the reading from Isaiah tells us. We are talking not about one who approaches us with anger, or even with fear or suspicion, but about one who manifests himself as vulnerable to us, trusting us with a belief in us that we do not easily share. What we call the incarnation might also be described as the way in which the Presence has come among us, entrusting himself to us so that we dare to make our history something that shares God's life.

Psalm 148 is a praise of creation and follows the movement of creation found in Genesis and in the temple. For temple worshipers, God dwelt “outside” creation in the Holy of Holies, and the movement of creation began from the veil which symbolized the beginning of material existence and flowed outward toward symbols of the “days” of creation. The psalm starts with the praises of the Lord alone outside all created matter. Then little by little each element of creation joins in: the heavens and the heights, the angels and the hosts. These were the nonmaterial parts of creation, created on the first day, when matter began to appear. Thereafter it is the created matter of each day that comes bursting into existence shouting its praise until finally, after the animals, it is the turn of the humans, the kings and the commoners. Last of all the horn is raised up for God's people, and he is become the Praise and the Presence and the Name. It is the birth of this horn that we are celebrating.

For us, it is difficult to cross the gap between creation, which we understand as something that happened at the beginning, and history, which we understand as the sorts of things which humans do thereafter. History has to do with facts, we think, while creation has to do with interpretation. No wonder we find it difficult to celebrate the incarnation. For us, the incarnation is predicated on an understanding of creation as permanently contemporary, as something always pulsating just beneath all matter, and, for those with open eyes, as something that announces the presence of a Creator. Incarnation is the Creator beginning to fulfill all the possibilities of history, insisting that what we humans make of the flux of matter can be turned into something that delights in and praises God.

In Matthew's infancy narrative, no sooner has the Presence come into the world than it begins to articulate all the places where God's making of history has been a thing of praise. Immediately the Presence begins to recount and celebrate, for example, the journey of the people of Israel to Egypt. The banal local monarch, Herod, is the portentous pharaoh of lore, killing all the firstborn of the Hebrew children, and Jesus relives the story of Moses' childhood, protected by Providence so that he can lead his people to an even greater promise. This is a sense of history that is distant from our sympathies, since here history is the Creator making narrative a bearer of abundance. In order for us to grasp this we are shown how events of the present repeat structures from the past, either falling away from these structures or, as in Matthew, building on them toward something new and not yet told. Imagine a succession of interlinked volcanoes: they may be similarly shaped, yet each is a chronological piece of one eruption that is simultaneously always under way and yet to be achieved.

Those attentive to the One who has come in begin to see the extraordinary mixture of the strength of the protagonist and the weakness of the Presence. Contrast the serenity with which the epistle to the Hebrews describes the way that the Creator enters into history as a priest—the least inappropriate analogy for telling the story of the One who made of our history something that shares in the life of God. Jesus' historical life and his manner of going to death achieved in fact what the ancient sacrifice of atonement had always prefigured.

And that historical life was, from before birth, a living forth into a narrative which was beset by danger, by risk. Even after his birth, flight, conspiracy, treachery and violent rage were the constant background to the One who was coming into the world.

While we are wrapped in praise this Christmastide, we might ponder on the contrast between this sense of perpetual danger and the extraordinary innocence and confidence of God speaking in Isaiah: “Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely.” What manner of heart is it who looks at our Herod-like history and sees it as—and offers it as—a journey to a promise?