

The ultimate why: Jeremiah 31:7-14; Ephesians 1:3-14; John 1:1-18

by [George C. Heider](#) in the [December 29, 2009](#) issue

The question arises in some form or another almost every time I teach a course on the Bible: If God knew what a mess humanity would make of God's creation, why did God create the world as we know it? The question has force for us, as it projects our own experience onto the cosmic screen. I, for one, can testify that if I'd known in advance where some of my life's decisions would lead, I would have run screaming in the opposite direction. Not so with God.

In God's case, we know the "what" for sure, if not the "why." The "what" is Christmas—the incarnation—and all that led up to it and all that followed from it. Today's second lesson—from Ephesians—assures us, in fact, that God "chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world," so that in a certain sense redemption (at least in intent) preceded creation (at least in act). Given the personal cost of that redemption to God, Christmas worship can only cause us to drop our jaws to our chests and our knees to the straw with all the greater force, as we consider that God in creation intentionally proceeded in a way that many a bride or groom or parent or employer or investor would avoid at all costs if they had a corresponding awareness of what was to come and of the price that their choices would exact from them.

It is the third reading for the day, from the prologue to John's Gospel, that pulls together these mysteries of creation and redemption. The lection provides a Christian rereading of the majestic first creation story from Genesis 1. The Old Testament account describes the acts of God Almighty, creating all things literally by fiat: "Let there be." John informs us that this "strong word [that] cleaved the darkness" (to quote Martin Franzmann's great hymn) was personal like God—indeed, that the "Word was God." The marvel is that this divine agent of creation, "through whom all things were made," is also the redeemer, such that, "to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God."

The effect of this extraordinary claim is to bring together in Christ (and therefore in God) the two prerequisites for hope among people who are dealing with the consequences of their own bad choices, as well as the realities of a corrupted creation: God is both able to help (because God is almighty) and wanting to help

(because God is invested in creation to the point of having joined with it in the Word made flesh).

This combination is no new thing. It is arguably why those savants and scribes whom many scholars date to the depths of Israel's exile in Babylon retained two creation stories at the opening of the Torah: the first (Gen. 1:1–2:4a) stressing God's transcendent power above and apart from creation; the second (Gen. 2:4b–25) emphasizing God's immanence and personal investment in creation. The same combination of power and love (perhaps what John meant in reverse order by "grace and truth") may be seen in the day's lesson from Jeremiah. After multiple chapters condemning God's people for their betrayal of the covenant (to the point that they have brought creation itself to the precipice of reversion to chaos), Jeremiah's words turn tender in chapters 30–31, his "Book of Consolation." The condemned are now saved. The scattered are now gathered. The devastated are now consoled. "For the Lord has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him."

Within the Old Testament itself, the depth and breadth of God's determination to redeem and restore his people is subtly conveyed by Jeremiah's words, "Ephraim is my firstborn." Historically Ephraim meant the old Northern Kingdom, "Israel," which had not existed for over a century when Jeremiah appeared on the scene. Ephraim had been scattered to the winds by imperial Assyrian policy, becoming the "Ten Lost Tribes." Yet Jeremiah asserts, "He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock." Clearly, what God has in mind strains historical possibility and human credulity.

All of which should prepare the way for those who have ears to hear the readings from Ephesians and John and to reflect on them in the light of what Christians often glibly call "the real meaning of Christmas." By this tenth day of Christmas the people of God should be ready to consider what happened at a depth or from an angle beyond the romantic montage on the mantle. Christmas represents the first great "fullness of time" (Gal. 4:4; cf. Eph. 1:10). Since before the foundation of the world God has prepared to deal with what will require an awe-full and terrible sacrifice; now all that God has prepared is put into motion. Long before Julius Caesar said it, God had committed to the notion: *Alea iacta est* ("The die has been cast"). With the incarnation, there was no going back. To switch to a different game's metaphor, the king was now in play, and there would literally be a checkmate (from Persian-to-Arabic *shah mat*, "the king is abandoned/dead").

To be sure, every Sunday is also a “little Easter,” and we know that the story ends well. God knew that, too, from before the beginning. But still, *o magnum mysterium* that God would undertake such a project at all. The ultimate why may escape us, but this we know: God loves us. And always has.