For grown-ups: Isaiah 52:7-10; John 1:1-14

by Fleming Rutledge in the December 15, 1999 issue

The first three Sundays of Advent speak of an adult Christ and the future reign of God, not of an infant born in the past. Only on the fourth Sunday of Advent do we turn back to the event of annunciation, and then on Christmas Eve to the birth of the Christ child.

It must have been like that for the earliest Christians: at first they were entirely focused on the resurrection, the gift of the Spirit and the eagerly expected Second Coming; then, as the time lengthened, they began to reflect with wonder and no little curiosity about the divine origin and human beginnings of their Lord. It may be helpful for us to remember this sequence as we try to make sense of Christmas in view of the multicultural "holiday" that now threatens to swallow up the Christian holy day. The lectionaries for Advent and Christmas reveal that the adult Messiah is primary. The climactic reading for the three services of Christmas is not the nativity from Luke but the prologue of John: "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." The numinous quality of this text will not be lost on children as they grow, but it clearly does not not fit our idea of a reading designed for them.

Many Christians, especially those from a tradition like mine that observes Advent scrupulously, not decorating the church or singing carols until Christmas Eve, find themselves playing two games at once during this season. On the one hand there is the usual frantic shopping, wreath hanging, tree trimming, partygoing and overeating. On the other hand there is the deepening mood of Advent, which calls us to a mature, clear-sighted and steadfast faith. A similar split in our sensibility is apparent in Christian bookstores and church gift shops where an austere Byzantine icon will be displayed next to an angel that looks like a Barbie doll. Christmas cards with medieval illustrations sit cheek-by-jowl with designs of Santas playing golf.

It seems to me that this aesthetic confusion contributes to theological immaturity. Grown-up people seem to become addled at this season as they try to recapture their lost childhoods. One of our leading mail-order companies put this verse on its Christmas shipping boxes a couple of years ago: "May you find among the gifts / Spread beneath your tree / The most welcome gift of all / The child you used to be."

A typical greeting card says, "Backward, turn backward, O Time, in your flight / Make me a child again, just for tonight!"

Harmless, you say. But in a culture like ours, where parents have very little time to spend with their children, and where an obsessive pursuit of youth has caused an 800 percent increase in cosmetic surgical procedures in ten years, a focus on becoming childlike at Christmas seems guaranteed to skew the message of the incarnation.

One of the most dramatic changes in my own denomination is the shift away from the adult midnight service on Christmas Eve to a wildly popular "family" service at an earlier hour, which by its very nature cannot offer much in the way of a sermon or more challenging music. I do not want to be misunderstood here; Christmas ritual can indeed be beneficial for the developing faith of children. However, if the children get the idea that Christmas is entirely for them, that there are no privileges reserved for their maturity, it does not seem likely that their faith will unfold in the direction of Good Friday.

A famous painting of the annunciation in the Cloisters in New York shows the embryonic Jesus slipping down a shaft of sunlight toward Mary—and he is already carrying his cross. This is the hidden message of the manger. A Christmas card that I have cherished for many years features a black-and-white woodcut showing Mary and the baby in the stable—and in the background the silhouette of a devastated city with the shell of a burned window, twisted and bent, but unmistakably shaped like a cross.

Reading familiar biblical passages in their context is sometimes startling. Such is the case with one of the three Isaiah texts appointed for Christmas: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the one who brings glad tidings . . . Break forth together into singing, you waste places of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people . . ." This rhapsodic passage moves directly without a break into the Suffering Servant text associated with Good Friday: "His appearance was marred beyond human semblance . . . he was despised and rejected." We may not linger at the crib.

In these stress-filled times, virtually all of us, as we get older, will seek relief by visiting, in our imaginations, a childhood Christmas of impossible perfection. These longings are powerful and can easily deceive us into grasping for a new toy, new car, new house, new spouse to fill up the empty spaces where unconventional love

belongs. Our longings are powerful, our needs bottomless, our cravings insatiable, our follies numberless. For those who cannot or will not look deeply into the human condition, sentiment and nostalgia can masquerade as strategies for coping quite successfully for a while—but because it is all based on illusion and unreality, it cannot be a lasting foundation for generations to come.

Christmas, someone said, is "the feast of Nicene dogma." That concept is not easy to teach or warm one's hands over without considerable effort, but it is not impossible to convey even to young children the sense that the real meaning of Christmas lies precisely in the combination of magical ceremonies and the grown-up message that in the very midst of our human selfishness, the waylaying love of God has broken through to us unconditionally.