

God in the particular (Luke 2:1-20)

The Christmas story is scandalous because of its specificity.

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Christmas begs for a story and not a theological treatise, but the story is scandalous because of its specificity, and that calls for theological reflection. As the story is told, God became this and not that. God took male shape and not female shape. God appeared as a Hebrew and not a Native American. God chose to be poor, vulnerable, and tossed aside—not middle class, powerful, and safe. An orthodox understanding of the mystery of the incarnation invites something more than just the story.

The specificity of a God who is not just universal-cosmic-deity but a God with fingerprints is the heart of the scandal. One might imagine a God creating billions of galaxies; it seems fiction and fantasy to claim that same God entering human life as a vulnerable baby. But if it's true then every one of us has a point of contact with the Creator. If it's true then the God who brought everything into being is not just some faraway force removed from our daily lives. Rather, as Wesley Granberg-Michaelson writes, “this is a God who does the miraculous in order to be with us; and every human life can be impregnated with the divine presence.”

That every human life has a point of contact with the Creator is the remarkable claim of Luke's nativity story. God didn't just give us creation and speak to us through scripture; God visited and became one of us, as a Nazarene visiting Bethlehem. And in doing so, we all have a way to see the fullness and glory of God, a way to engage or relate to the Divine. The incarnation is scandalous, mysterious—and if it is more than a metaphor, then it's the central essential miracle of the Christian tradition.

“I bring you good news,” says the angel to the shepherds. In Greek, the second-person pronoun here is plural; it has the sense of “all y'all.” But this plural personal pronoun is also in the dative case.

Now, nothing screams “Merry Christmas” like a little grammar lesson, but while English doesn't have a dative case, Greek does. The dative case is reserved for things that come directly to another party. The dative would be used when I give a gift to you, or I pull you aside to say something directly to you. The dative is personal in the sense that something is being directed quite specifically your way.

So the announcement of the angel is not a generic, all-purpose bulletin. It is personalized. This good news is for you.

The scandal is not just the annoying specificity of God but also the annoying specificity of you. This good news of great joy is for you. God for you, with you, beside you, in you. It's a point of contact with the Creator.

In a Christmas Eve sermon, Martin Luther put it as a question:

Of what benefit would it be to me if Jesus would have been born a thousand times and it would have been sung daily in my ears that Jesus Christ was born, but that I was never to hear that Jesus Christ was born for me?

The challenge of this familiar text, between that which is outrageous and that which is sublime, is that we would know God not as a proposition but as a person. The challenge is that each of us would engage with the one born in a stone cave and nailed to a wood cross.

And therefore, maybe all we can long for is wonder: that angels sing and shepherds forget about their sheep, that God makes his way down a birth canal, that the Creator of the universe is a fetus. That at a particular moment in time, at a particular place in space, in a particular person, God arrived among us.