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Isaiah 52: 7 – 10
 Hebrews 1: 1 – 12

Psalm 98: 1 – 6
 John 1: 1 – 14

*Welcome, all wonders in one sight!
 Eternity shut in a span,
 Summer in winter, day in night,
 Heaven in earth and God in man.
 Great little one, whose all-embracing birth
 Lifts earth to heaven, stoops heaven to earth.*

In his *Nativity Hymne*, 17th century English poet and cleric, Richard Crashaw, captures the wonder and the mystery of Christmas. The paradox that Christmas presents is that the transcendent, all-powerful force we call God, Creator of the Cosmos, and this immanent, all-vulnerable little package we call the Baby Jesus are one.

On Christmas Day, we never get to hear the ever familiar but ever new stories of angels and shepherds and cattle and Joseph and Mary. Instead, we hear the magnificent hymns of Isaiah, the Letter to the Hebrews and John which praise the God who was before all time, and who will be after all time and who in fact is completely unbounded by the very human concept of time. We experience the movement from cradle to cosmos, as God and humanity, flesh and spirit, are forever entwined in one place and time. An extraordinary God come to earth as an ordinary child. It is the God who cannot bear to be apart from the divine creation. It is the God who destines all of creation for salvation and redemption, and if that takes getting the divine hands a little messy, then so be it.

A friend of mine has a picture of a little child, naked as the day he was born, playing in the bright sunlight on the beach. The child is lifting an inflatable beach ball that is decorated like the earth. It is an image which captures what today, Christmas, is all about. And in fact, what every day up until now and every day yet to come are all about. A great little one, whose all-embracing birth lifts earth to heaven, and stoops heaven to earth. We are held safe in the hands of a childlike Christ, who delights in us, even as the primordia waters cover the earth, bringing forth life and giving growth to all of creation.

In Matthew and Luke's stories of the nativity (Mark doesn't have one), we have the close-up views of Christmas, the fine details, the character studies, if you will. In John's Gospel, we have the glory that is the big picture of Christmas, the landscape mural that we have to step away from in order to see it all, if we do even then. The little picture and the big picture. We need both because neither one alone is the whole story. John captures that moment of connection between the two when he writes that "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him." That is the Christmas moment – the moment of introduction – or perhaps reintroduction – of God to the world. The moment of vindication from darkness, the moment of redemption, the incarnation of the Truth. God steps onto the earthly stage in a moment of celestial spotlighting to bring us the good news in a little package that we can't help but receive and welcome. "Break forth together in singing, you ruins of Jerusalem!" writes Isaiah, "for the Lord has comforted his people." Break forth in song indeed.

Christmas is a time of paradox: the presence, as in Immanuel, God with us, and the presents, as in the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Heaven on earth and God in man, as Crashaw

wrote. The splendor and the simplicity, the miraculous and the mundane, eternal triumph and temporal existence, the victory and the vulnerability. Christmas is the point of intersection between all these seeming opposites.

Matthew and Luke give us the earthy, the simple, the mundane, the temporal. John gives us the glorious, the splendorous, the miraculous, the eternal. All of them give us victory and vulnerability. We are used to the oh-so-human vulnerability of the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, but John also gives us the oh-so-divine vulnerability of a God daring to break all the rules and to assume all the limitations of earth by dwelling among us. “And the Word became flesh,” John writes, “and pitched a tent among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” How much more vulnerable, open, humble, or accessible can God be than to be one of us and live by our rules or lack thereof?

Grace and truth. Christmas in a nutshell. It would be nice to say forget the crumpled wrapping paper, forget the lights and ornaments on the drying out or artificial Christmas tree, forget the turkey carcass and the doorstep fruitcake, and forget the bills yet to come. It would be nice to say that they are not part of the truth, not part of the grace, but in fact they are. Because Christmas not only celebrates God’s grace, Christmas celebrates the ultimate Truth. And that Truth is, as St. Athanasius put it, that God has become what we are, so that we might become what God is. Christmas celebrates our God-given, God-shared humanness, with all of our ordinariness, all of our shallowness, all of our limitations which God accepts by becoming that little babe in a manger. There is nothing so ordinary and mundane as an animal stall, and if God can stoop to be in the midst of that kind of ordinariness, then God can certainly be in the midst of our routine, day-in-day-out ordinariness. Do any of our holiday rituals even come close to celebrating the glory of God, the triumph of light over darkness, or the obsolescence of time and space in God’s kingdom? Or even our joy in the good news? No, probably not. But then, it isn’t our step toward God that matters. It is God’s step towards us as the feet of that heavenly child hit the earth running.

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him, not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

That is Christmas: the light that shines in the darkness. Have you ever noticed that John uses the past tense – “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness DID not overcome it” – it’s a done deal. Light wins. The light that not only points to but is the hope, the joy, the grace and the truth. Welcome, little one. Welcome, O Lord and Savior! Merry Christmas.

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