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CHRISTMAS EVE—A

He Became Like Us, So We Could Become Like Him

(Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11:14; Luke 2:1-16)

Tonight, a few days after the longest and darkest night of the year, Christians around the world celebrate the feast of Christmas. We celebrate the unconditional love of God for the world and for all people, made flesh in a little child.

Through Mary's faith, and the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus was conceived in Mary's womb; carried by her for the time of her pregnancy, and finally, born in the humblest and poorest of circumstances in Bethlehem.

The place where it is said that Jesus was born is today a church, the Church of the Nativity. Pilgrims and tourists throng there every day, to kneel and touch the stone where Jesus may have been born; and to venerate the spot where the manger may have been.

The poverty and humility of this birth is accentuated by the continued existence of homes in Bethlehem that are probably very much like the building where Jesus may have been born. In Palestine at that time, homes were often built on top of or in front of a cave. The family would live and sleep in the front part, while the animals would sleep in the back part, in the cave itself.

The probability is that Mary and Joseph would have gone to the back part of the dwelling, into the cave itself, to have more privacy for the birth of her child, and so Jesus was born in what literally was a house-stable, and probably placed in a manger.

So, the very Son of God; the Light of the World; the Mighty Father; the Prince of Peace, came into this world totally vulnerable, with only the smallest

and poorest of folks knowing and welcoming him. What a divine reversal is at work here, as all human values of pride, wealth and power are turned upside down. It is in the little ones, the humble ones, that the Son of God finds himself most at home, and most at work.

The birth of this God-Man child among us carries a clear message. Jesus has become like us; now we must become like him. This invitation entails a transformation, a change that only God can bring about, through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In that sense, Richard Rohr is right when he says that Christmas is already Easter. We cannot separate the crib from the cross. Christmas begins what Easter will complete – the two-fold mission of Jesus sent into this world to redeem us and to sanctify us.

Put differently, Jesus came into this world to save us from our sins, and to heal us of our sinfulness, that which makes us sin. The best thing that we can do to allow Jesus to save us, is to repent of our sin and wrongdoing; to confess those sins in sacramental reconciliation, to make a declaration to never sin that way again, to make amends for any harm we may have done to anyone else, and then to pray every morning for the strength and power to remain faithful to a sinless way of life.

The best thing that we can do to allow Jesus to sanctify or heal us, is to identify our negative attitudes, character defects or shortcomings; share them with trusted others, then pray for healing of these defects within us, and have others pray for our healing and transformation as well.All of this healing work can take place in the context of doing the will of God in many other ways. One is certainly to keep the 10 commandments, four of which honor God, and four that involve a right relationship with other people.

We must also be conscious of keeping and living out the Great Commandment that Jesus gave us – to love God with our whole being, and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians goes even further, reminding us of Jesus' command that we *love others as we love ourselves*. On this hangs the whole Law and the Prophets, asserts Paul. That is the whole bible boiled down to one sentence – what could be simpler than that?

Our transformation will also involve, above all, loving our enemies. To love those who have hurt us, is done best by forgiving them from the heart. The late Nelson Mandella is a tremendous example of this Christian core teaching and belief. Imprisoned for 27 years during the apartheid years in South Africa, he left the jail with no desire for revenge or punishment. He clearly stated that if he hung onto anger, then his abusers would still be controlling him. What a marvelous example he set for the world to follow.

When we can find ourselves even thanking God for all the things that did not work out in our lives, for all the hurts that came our way, then surely we have come full circle, and are healed, transformed and becoming Christ-like.

The Eucharist that we celebrate tonight, as we adore the child in the crib, is also a sharing in the fruits of the love of that same child grown into a man, who forgave those

abusing him on the cross.

May our celebration tonight be not only fitting worship for the Christ child who became one of us. May it also empower us to become like him, and to love the world as he did.

God in Jesus Christ became like us. Let us respond by becoming like Jesus, through lives of worship, love and self-acceptance.

Archbishop Emeritus Sylvain Lavoie, OMI

NO ROOM IN THE INN

Some scholars suggest that there is a deeper lesson in Jesus having to be born in a stable because there was no room for him in the inn.

What is being stressed is not so much lack of hospitality by an innkeeper, rather it is the fact that Jesus was born outside of a city, outside of what is comfortable, outside of glamour and fame, outside of being recognized by the rich and the powerful, and beyond notice by the everyday world. Jesus was born in anonymity, poor, outside of all notice, except for family and God.

Being rejected by the city also foreshadowed his death. Jesus' earthly life will end as it began. He will be a stranger, an outsider, crucified outside the city just as he was born outside the city.

Thomas Merton once gave a wonderful commentary on this: *Into this world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for Him at all, Christ has come uninvited. But because He cannot be at home in it, because He is out of place in it, and yet must be in it, His place is with those others for whom there is no room. His place is with those who do not belong, who are rejected by power because they are regarded as weak, those who are discredited, who are denied status as persons, who are tortured, bombed, and exterminated. With those for whom there is no room, Christ is present in the world. He is mysteriously present in those for whom there seems to be nothing but the world at its worst.*

Mary gave birth to the Christ in a stable because there was no room for them in the inn. It is a comment upon what, in fact, lies deepest within human life. In essence, what it says is that it is not those who sit at the center of things, the powerful, the rich, the famous, the government leaders, the entertainment celebrities, the corporate heads, the scholars and academics, who ultimately sit at the center of life. What deepest and most meaningful inside of life lies in anonymity, unnoticed by the powerful, tenderly swaddled in faith, outside the city.

By Ron Rolheiser, OMI

CHRISTMAS DAY—A

He Became Like Us, So We Could Become Like Him

(Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11:14; Luke 2:1-16)

What words best describe Christmas? Humble faith? Immense hope? Great joy? Endless Peace? Perhaps all of these?

We could add two other perhaps shocking words: *Ordinariness* and *Poverty*. These two words convey, at a very deep level, the meaning of Christmas.

My brothers and sisters – Christmas invites us to recognize Jesus in our poverty and ordinariness.

In his book *Mother Theresa - Come Be My Light,* Fr. Brian Kolodiejchuk M.C., shared with the world the letters and correspondence of this extraordinary woman known as the "Saint of Calcutta" for her ministry among the destitute and dying poor of India. Fr. Brian, who was her spiritual director, writes that one of the striking things about St. Mother Theresa as she began her new order *The Missionaries of Charity* was her insistence on Absolute Poverty. In her words, "By Absolute Poverty I mean real and complete poverty – not starving – but wanting – just only what the real poor have – to be really dead to all that the world claims for its own." The reason she gives for this strict observance of poverty is because Jesus had asked her for "nuns covered with my poverty of the Cross."

In her strong faith and love for God, St. Mother Theresa wanted to be like Jesus who was born into a poor family and in a manger because there was no room for him in the inn. The God who is born into our world is born into a world that had no room for him.

It is still the same today. Our society at this moment is trying to take Christ out of Christmas with "holiday trees" and "happy holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas". The pace of our own lives can be so busy we don't have time for prayer, worship, a sincere confession, perhaps even each other at this time of year. Our priorities get lost and we get distracted and confused.

Because our world is so selfish, sinful, in love with wealth, status, power and pleasure, Jesus must come into it uninvited. Because Jesus is meek, gentle, forgiving and pure love, just the opposite of what the world desires, he cannot be at home in this world. Yet as God he must be in it, so his place is with the others for whom there is no room – the poor, the discredited, the vulnerable, the elderly, those who are marginalized as persons.

That is a message our culture doesn't want to hear, but needs to hear. The poor more easily make a place for God in their lives. Their stables and mangers are more available for God's birth than our hotels, boardrooms, casinos, bingo palaces and extravagant homes filled with our status symbols.

In our lives and in our world, so often, there is no room at the inn, no place to welcome God who wants to be born in it. As it was at the first Christmas, the Christ child today must be born outside our cities, among the poor. So, to find him ourselves, we must let

ourselves be led by the poor, the children, our own brokenness and poverty, to the mangers in our world today.

The second reading speaks of “he who will redeem us from our iniquity”. One of the best ways for us to meet Jesus is to do just that - let him redeem us - save us from our sins. We do that best by celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation – going to confession. There we face our poverty, our sin and our sinfulness; we name it, share it and receive his transforming forgiveness and healing. That is the best way to prepare for, and even experience, the joy of Christmas personally, before we celebrate it at Christmas time ritually and liturgically as we are doing now.

Another striking characteristic of St. Mother Theresa was humility, her desire to be hidden, to not seek attention, to be ordinary, to avoid the spotlight. She asked that her letters be kept secret and burned after she died, even as she realized some would have to be kept for a historical record. Those in charge of her affairs, however, realized the world needed to hear about this extraordinary woman who thought herself nothing out of the ordinary.

And now we learn from her letters a tremendous spiritual lesson – that God works in the dryness and ordinariness of daily life, not necessarily in sensational and spectacular ways. People thought this woman, who was so close to God, must be experiencing visions and spiritual highs as a matter of course. Her letters reveal just the opposite – she emerges as a classic mystic whose inner life burned with charity but whose heart was tested and purified by an intense trial of dryness in prayer and the experience of the apparent absence of God for over fifty years – a true dark night of the soul.

That too, is the message of Christmas. Christmas is nothing out of the ordinary. After the birth of Christ, we need not look to the extraordinary, the spectacular or the miraculous to find God. God is found where we live – in our kitchens, at our tables, in our wounds, and in each other’s faces. That is what St. Mother Theresa experienced and lived fully, in faith.

This is hard to believe and has always been hard to accept. When Jesus was on earth, virtually no one believed he was the Messiah, precisely because he was so ordinary, so unlike what they imagined God to be. They had expected a superstar, a king, someone who would turn the world rightfully upside down. Preaching meekness, gentleness and unconditional love, Jesus did not live up to those false expectations.

It is interesting that the bible does not tell us what Jesus looked like, nor even if he had any outstanding psychological traits. In terms of appearance, he was too ordinary, not worth describing, nothing out of the ordinary. He looked like everyone else. Even after the resurrection, he is mistaken for a gardener, a cook and a traveler.

Things haven’t changed much in two thousand years. Seldom does Jesus meet our expectations today. We are still often looking for him beyond the ordinary, beyond the gardener, the neighbor, the stranger, trying to find a miraculous Christ. We go to places where he might be appearing, or where his mother might be shedding tears, yet we pass by and ignore the tears shed at our own breakfast table. We are intrigued by the wounds of a Padre Pio, yet we fail to pay attention to the wounds of those we hurt in our

own family, or even to our own emotional or moral wounds.

We look for Christ everywhere, except where he is to be found – in the ordinary - right around us, in our families, community and workplaces, in our own healing journeys, where the incarnation took place – in our flesh.

St. John of the Cross puts it this way:

“God has spoken so completely through his own Word that he chooses to add nothing. He spoke partially through the prophets, but has now said everything in Christ. Anyone seeking some new vision or revelation from him would commit an offense, for instead of focusing his eyes entirely on Christ he would desire something other than Christ, or beyond him. Fix your eyes on Christ alone for in him all is revealed and in him you will find more than you could ever ask for or desire.”

Love is a thing that happens in ordinary places – in kitchens, at tables, in bedrooms, in workplaces, in families, in the flesh. God abides in us when we also abide there. Through the Incarnation, God crawls into ordinary life and invites us to meet him there, in our own poverty and the poverty of those around us.

Spiritual writer Flor McCarthy shares an interesting insight. The shepherds returned to their lowly work and obscure life. Nothing had changed yet everything had changed. Life went on as before but with one major difference: now their hearts were filled with wonder. They now had a new vision, a new hope, a new sense of the love of God for them and of his presence with them. Their lives, which a short while ago were dim, now glowed with new meaning. The old world had become like a new country where everything glistened with marvel. Our challenge is to find that newness in the ordinariness of our lives.

My mother had Alzheimer’s disease for years before she died. She did not know who I was. I would relate to her by feeding her. I came to realize that I needed her poverty, her brokenness, because I was too busy, too efficient. To relate to her I had to slow down and feed her, and there I found Christ – feeding my own mother and getting in touch with my own mortality.

The Eucharist we celebrate tonight is another powerful hint at this mystery – Christ is found in the poor and the ordinary. These poor, ordinary gifts of bread and wine will be transformed, through the prayer and faith of the presider and the community, into the Body and Blood of Christ. If we receive them with repentant, humble faith, then we are transformed into the Body of Christ, sent to be light to the world.

So, may our faith and our celebration of Christ’s birth tonight, help us to recognize and experience Christ who is born into our poverty and our ordinariness. Christmas is about being poor enough to recognize our need for Jesus, and nothing out of the ordinary.

May God bless us all with his forgiveness and healing; his peace and joy, this Christmas and throughout the New Year.

Archbishop Emeritus Sylvain Lavoie, OMI

CHRISTMAS AS SHATTERING THE CONTAINERS OF OUR EXPECTIATIONS

The power of God works to melt hearts rather than break them. That's what vulnerability and helplessness does too.

That's what infants can do. God's power works through a lot of things, but it works with a special power through vulnerability and helplessness. Intimacy is predicated on vulnerability. You cannot overpower another person to make him or her love you unless you overpower his or her heart the way an infant does.

We can seduce each other through attractiveness, draw admiration through our talents, and intimidate each other through superior strength, but none of these will ultimately provide the basis for a shared community of life for long … but the powerlessness and innocence of a baby can provide that.

God's power, like a baby sleeping in its crib, lies in our world as a quiet invitation, not as a threat or coercion.

When Christ took on flesh in our world in Bethlehem two thousand years ago and then died seemingly helpless on a cross in Jerusalem some thirty years later, this is what was revealed: the God who is incarnated in Jesus Christ enters into human suffering rather than stands clear of it, is in solidarity with us rather than standing apart from us, manifests that the route to glory is downward rather than upward, stands with the poor and powerless rather than with the rich and powerful, invites rather than coerces, and is more manifest in a baby than in a superstar.

Merry Christmas!!

By Ron Rolheiser, OMI

LONGING AT THE CENTRE

Longing and yearning are so close to the core of the human person that some theologians define loneliness as being the human soul; that is, the human soul is not something that gets lonely, it is a loneliness

The soul is not something that has a cavity of loneliness within it; it is a cavity of loneliness, a Grand Canyon without a bottom, a cavern of longing created by God. The cavern is not something in the soul. It is the soul. The soul is not a something that has a capacity for God. It is a capacity for God.

When Augustine says: "*You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you,*" he is, of course, pointing out the reason why God would have made us this way. And, as his prayer indicates, the ultimate value of longing lies precisely in its incessant nature, by never letting us rest with anything less than the infinite and eternal it guarantees that we will seek God or be frustrated.

Longing shapes the soul in many ways, particularly by helping create the space within us where God can be born. Longing creates in us the stable and the manger of Bethlehem. It is the trough into which God can be born.

For Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the soul, just like the body, has a temperature, and for Teilhard, what longing does is to raise the temperature of the soul. Longing, restlessness, yearning, and carrying tension raise our psychic temperatures. This, a raised temperature, has a number of effects on the soul.

It's analogous to what happens in physical chemistry, where unions that cannot take place at lower temperatures will often take place at higher ones. Longing and yearning open us to unions that otherwise would not happen, particularly in terms of our relationship to God and the things of heaven. Put more simply, in our loneliness we sizzle and eventually burn away a lot of the coldness and other obstacles that block union.

This sizzling, longing, brings the Messiah closer because it swells the heart so that it becomes more what God created it to be – a Grand Canyon, without a bottom, that aches in lonely inconsummation until it finds its resting place in God.

By Ron Rolheiser, OMI

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Aurora Living: Formation Through Word & Creation is a spiritual formation community at the intersection of faith contemporary issues: creation care, social justice, & reconciliation. Our winter 2023 module (January to March) entitled *Wisdom: The Wells We Drink From* will feature presenters Sr. Priscilla Solomon, Ron Rolheiser, Gisele Bauche and many others. Accepting new applicants, **early registration rates end December 15.** Opening retreat January 20-22, 2023. Contact Star of the North for more information or visit www.staroftheNORTH.ca/wisdom

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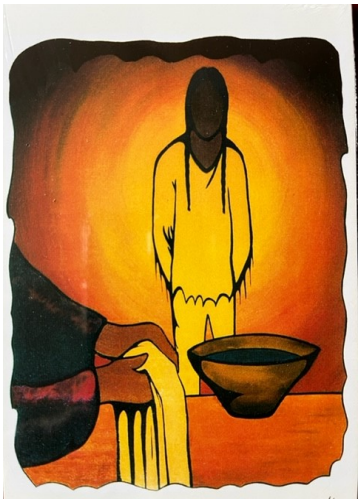
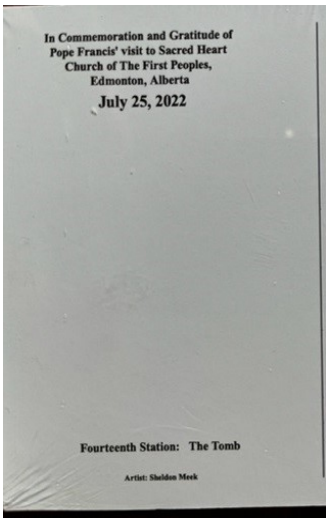
Commemorative postcards available for $5.00 per set. Please call the office at 780-422-3052.





For fundraising one mug is $20 and two mugs of $30. T-shirts are $20 each.

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Blue Monday Meets Blue Tranquility
Monday, January 16, 2023
10:00 am-3:00 pm
Register by January 10
providencerenewal.ca

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Deepening Centering Prayer Retreat

Transformation in Everyday Life
with Liz Rees and Heather Mattson McCrady
Friday, January 27, 2023 (7 pm) to
Sunday, January 29, 2023 (1 pm)
Register by January 19
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Spiritual BOOK CLUB

via Zoom

Monday, Jan 9 (7:00-8:30 PM)
Richard Wagamese Selected:
What Comes From Spirit
by Richard Wagamese

Register at providencerenewal.ca

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For more information or to register visit http://www.providencerenewal.ca
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