

**GO; LUKE 1:39-55; 12.20.09; THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER**

Ben Schott, popular social researcher, taking off on the Beatles “When I’m 64” (which was the life expectancy for men when the song was written) reported in an article entitled “When I’m 57-85” statistics of various age groups and specific life experiences.

Not surprisingly, an increase in age brings an increase in such things as heart attack, ulcers, arthritis, asthma, stroke, hypertension, and cancer as well as the increase of physical limitations from walking to dressing to driving a car.

The good news is that satisfaction in primary relationships tends to remain high throughout the years and even increase with age in some cases. But the bad news is the body. It simply deteriorates and wears out.

If you have been to the hospital lately or a nursing home or hospice room, the statistics Schott reports are graphically illustrated. If you’ve nursed a pulled muscle or common cold you are acquainted with the limitations and frustrations of the body.

So it is a fair question on this day on which our children reenact the story of Jesus’ birth, why God ever decided to undertake the project in the first place. *Why did God* decide to enter human flesh and dwell among us?

I am talking about the incarnation – which literally means the “enfleshment” of God. Very God of very God, very Light of very Light, as the Nicene Creed puts it, entering this veil of tears as the poet said.

Why would God choose finite over infinite; subject herself to the petty politics, ego trips and flawed loyalties of humans; not to mention the pain and discomfort of sprained ankles, broken bones, tooth aches and worse?

Surely, there is nothing in this life that would enhance God’s being, since God’s being is, church doctrine purports, perfect and complete in itself. Nor can I imagine that when you compare the two – this life and eternal life – as God surely could, that the list for worldly existence outweighs the life of eternity.

Nevertheless, God chose to come among us which is what “Immanuel” means literally. And, whereas, some of the ancient writers assumed that if and when that day would ever come that God would enter our world as a conquering five-star general, in fact what happened is that God’s coming was the complete opposite: a peasant baby, in a poor village, in ancient Palestine. Which translates to daily struggle under one of the most ruthless Caesars of all time, in a land of abject poverty, without any of the modern conveniences like the internet and iPods.

On the face of it, it is a perplexing if not incomprehensible claim. Theologians and religious leaders through the centuries have struggled to figure it out.

One of the most popular and least compelling explanations is that God came into this world because we are sinners and need to be straightened out. This view is in the gospels and *there is truth* to our flawed character and God’s offer of healing.

But coming for this purpose alone, to fix us, has the sound and smell of a theological formula and little appeal to the heart.

A member shared a column that offers, I think, a clue as to why God undertook the journey from heaven to earth. “The great gift of organized religion is the gift of community,” it says. “Life is not meant to be lived alone or even in the small confines of the family.”

“We need community where we can help others in need; pray together when we are weak and gain strength from those who are strong; educate our children in the moral law and traditions of our ancestors; and nurture the spirit of generosity, forgiveness, charity and benevolence that elude us when we try to go it alone.”

Something special happens when people – diverse in age, gender, politics, sexual orientation, race, and class – come together in mutual commitment to one another inspired by their experience of a God who so came to them.

What I am saying is that just as the church is about the relationships between people, so God with us, Immanuel, is about God’s relationship with us.

God was willing to take off the royal robe of heaven and don the earthly garb of humanity not because we needed to be fixed but because in all of our wonder and brilliance and stupidity and self-absorption God couldn’t bear to be apart from us.

God did not create us to be a race of automatons but a human race free to love or hate, nurture or reject, give or hoard. God wanted to be God among us as one of us, first and foremost, because God loves us.

Here’s an example. This Christmas will be the first one in 28 years that our sons will not be with us. We’re doing a few things differently: no big tree with 3,000 ornaments, no candle in every one of the sixty-five windows – but a live Norfolk pine, a few lights, door wreaths and decorations, things we can enjoy then take down easily before leaving for Israel in mid-January.

But the new and simple decorations will not hide our sons’ absence on Christmas morning. We will iChat with them and email a video or two on Carol’s iPhone of the dog opening her presents but it won’t be the same.

Many of you have made this transition in your own families. You know what I’m talking about. So we sent packages stuffed, not with big fancy gifts but little things we know our boys appreciate and associate with our family Christmases together. I suppose if we had it in our power we’d send ourselves in one of those flat rate US Postal boxes to South Korea or Long Island. It’s that longing to be with someone you love that is at the heart of the incarnation.

13<sup>th</sup> c. scholar Duns Scotus said that while Jesus did in fact die for sinners as the gospel says, God would have become incarnate for us even if we had not sinned—our sin not being the whole point of the incarnation but God’s determination simply to be with us.

That’s why God left the life of eternity and came to us in a peasant baby. God did not want to be apart from us and was willing to take on this life of limitation, imperfection and occasional beauty and glory.

That same determination and desire is in the heart of every parent in this room who would sacrifice their own well-being for their child; it is in the heart of every lover

here who would die for the beloved. Which is precisely what God does in Christ – sacrifices his own well-being, dies for us.

This has major implications for what the church calls the “doctrine of the nature of God” – which too often resembles logical or mathematical formulas – “if this, then that” – yet fails to capture the passion and humanly perceivable motivation of a God who is not satisfied and cannot live without the people he made and loves.

God is more than a spiritual mechanic who comes to overhaul our souls or a cosmic bell-hop, as C.S. Lewis said, who responds to our every need and expectation. Those images come from constipated, guilt-plagued theologians and self-centered prosperity preachers.

Rather God is a long lost companion who knows us better than we know ourselves; a loving parent; a passionate lover whose desire to be with us reveals that his need and joy are fulfilled in you and me – just as we are.

That’s the meaning of the story the children told us this morning. If you open yourself to the silence or the hymns or the familiar and strange words of the Scripture I’d wager, if you’re patient, you’ll see the imprint of God’s presence in your own life – at times when you may or may not have even been aware of it.

God longs for nothing more than to enter our hearts and homes this season and share the joys and sorrows and struggles of our lives.

But even if the Creator of the universe can take on human form, the Creator cannot force himself into anyone’s life or soul. This incredible deference to you and me of an all-powerful God is the tell-tale sign of a wise parent or smitten lover.

We’ve been talking over these past weeks about what it means to get ready in Advent to have God come into our lives.

The word today is “go”; we make the journey to Bethlehem with the God of the universe patiently at our side, waiting for us not just to acknowledge his presence but return his love and attention. Amen.