

At this point, the calendar year is basically over. Retrospective pieces appear in the media, and inevitably we look back and reflect on the year that was. I'm no exception, and this time I get the distinct impression that 2023 was, in one way or another, an especially difficult year. If I were to ask you what headlines from the past year spring to mind, I would wager that most of them would be negative. Our parish lost some beloved members, our state and our nation seem more divided and contentious than ever, and the international order appears to be breaking down as wars rage in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa.

Which raises the question: what is Christmas in the face of all this? Do we really expect these stories, this music, these traditions to change the world in any meaningful way, or even our own lives? Perhaps they will provide a pleasant diversion, and indeed, a moment's peace, joy, and refuge is a much appreciated thing in trying times. But after the gifts are opened, family and friends have gone home, decorations are put away, and the church's liturgical color changes from white to green, will any of the good of Christmas remain?

Well, you tell me. Because while Christmas may well feel like the end of the year and the culmination of the season, that's pretty much the opposite of what's going on. The world God joined at Christmas was, if anything, even more broken than ours is today. That's the very reason why God took on flesh and became one of us. And while Jesus never did kick out the Romans, for he was not that sort of King, he did transform the place of his birth into a place of holy peace, a momentary microcosm of the harmony God had intended for humanity in Eden.

Christmas, far from the end, is only the beginning, the first moment when humanity came face to literal face with the divine, the first moment we could see and hear and feel and touch and, let's be honest, smell, our God. We celebrate this moment because, while the birth of humanity's savior might not in itself have changed anything in the world, *our savior is born!* God's promises are kept! Our hope has been fulfilled! God has made the most profound investment in the world that ever could be made, because God has become part of the world. From now on, God has literal skin in the game.

Therefore, the birth of Jesus, the Son of God, has profound implications for humanity. The immense love God has for us, and God's choice to express that love proactively and by giving up heavenly splendor and perfection in favor of earthly vulnerability and limitation, all of this will inevitably lead to our facing choices that we would rather not make. How will we respond, what will we make of our lives, how much time and money and autonomy will we give up for the God who gave up heaven for us?

According to legend, a child came up with a fine answer to these questions. The story goes that one Christmas Eve, the famous preacher William Sloane Coffin, Jr. was scheduled to preach at the massive Riverside Church in New York City, right after the Christmas pageant. During the pageant, the boy who was playing the innkeeper

delivered his one line, "There's no room at the inn." But then, seeing Mary and Joseph walking away so moved the boy that he blurted out, "Wait! You can stay at my house!" The great preacher, knowing he'd been outdone, then went into the pulpit and simply said, "Amen."

Now, the idea of any preacher surrendering a chance to speak strains my belief in this story, but the great thing about legends is that they are meant to communicate truths, not facts. And the truth is that all of us can choose to invite Jesus to take up residence in our hearts and minds. Of course this is more than a "small step," but a decision that will change us, just as welcoming any new baby into any home changes that home drastically, but the Christ child is God's love made flesh, and the result of welcoming him will be greater than our imaginations can contain. Yet we do have some idea what to expect.

The more we give ourselves over to Jesus, the better our lives will be. Like any baby, he will grow if we nurture him, in that our relationship with him will grow. His homes, heaven, the church, and open hearts, will come to feel like places we ourselves can naturally call home. We will grow closer to him, love him and trust him more, until we find ourselves transformed, patterning our whole lives after his teachings. This may put us in conflict with the world, as Jesus himself was, but the troubles of the world show that there is no such thing as being in harmonious unity with the world. The benefit to us of worshipping and following Jesus faithfully is not a benefit as the world construes, money, power, or status. Jesus is, and offers, better things than the world.

[This is especially important to remember in the context of a celebration of Holy Baptism. Little Daniel here is far more than a reminder of the Christ Child; he is beloved and important in his own right. We look forward to seeing him grow up, not only physically, mentally, and emotionally, but also spiritually. His baptism is an occasion of great joy for his family and for the whole of Christ's church, both on earth and in heaven, but it is also an opportunity for us to reflect on our own baptisms, and how we have grown, and how God might be leading us to continue growing. Because...]

The more closely we follow Jesus, the less we will feel afraid or dejected from whatever is going on in the world, and the more responsive we will be to the needs of the world. The more closely united to Jesus we are, the more his divine love will guide us, nurture us, and heal us, and our differences with one another will diminish. The consequence will not be "a world of difference," but something more: a different world. So rather than looking back on a difficult year, I for one am looking forward to a world in which all the good of Christmas remains because all of us have given all of ourselves to Jesus, our God who gave up everything for us. And rather than wonder, what is Christmas in the face of all this, we might ask instead, what is all this in the face of Christmas?