

Born in Us Today: The Gospel of Incarnation

By Wendy Farley | Volume 3.1 Fall 2016

Who is Jesus for a small village in Mozambique, the people of Ferguson, a busy pastor, a child awed by candles and music? Christianity is a mosaic through which people are formed by its root wisdom: that the infinite and unknowable ground of creation united itself with humanity in the body of Jesus of Nazareth. As we enter into the joy of Advent, we are invited to contemplate again the beauty of this mystery.

The people of Israel understood divine power to be intimately related to history. But history is pretty ugly, especially for a small conquered nation like Israel. To say that YHWH is the lord of history is to perceive that behind the ravages of time stands an unconquerable vision of justice and compassion. It is through this lens that the basic ideas of the Incarnation began to unfold.

In history, might is right. The most ruthless ruler gains power, and stronger armies overwhelm weaker ones. Israel saw its dreams and kings defeated. But they had a name for something that testified on their behalf; a name for justice that was not undone even as the poor were left to hunger for food and dignity, a compassion that testified on behalf of orphans and aliens. The prophets acknowledged the external devastation of war and the internal devastation of expediency and yet they prophesied hope. To trample the poor and then conduct holy rites is to God an abomination, but even this word is hopeful because it recognizes that things do not have to be this way. *Injustice does not express who Israel really is*. God calls Israel back to its true identity in ever-renewed invitations to participate in the divine compassion.

Seek justice

Rescue the oppressed

Defend the orphan

Plead for the widow. . . .

Zion will be redeemed by justice. (Isaiah 1:17, 27)

Isaiah witnessed the suffering of the socially vulnerable and the disasters of war and yet reminds Israel of a promise: however far we stray from the divine goodness, it will relentlessly call us back.

The prophets do not foretell but unveil. They reveal God's anguish in the face of injustice. The degradation of other human beings that seems casual to us is unbearable to God. The purpose of prophecy is "to conquer callousness, to change the inner [human] as well as to revolutionize history."^[1] This vision arises from "fellowship with the feelings of God, a sympathy with the divine pathos."^[2] The prophetic unveiling speaks the truth about social evil and hypocrisy, especially when these wear the cloak of religion. The prophets unmask our self-deceptions. But the prophets also unveil the deeper intention of divine goodness: that our injustices will always be held in the divine compassion. Israel's faith is rooted in depictions of God's unceasing labor on behalf of humanity. The divine Mother leads Israel and refuses to give it up: "Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms;

but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness and bands of love... How can I give you up, Ephraim?. . . My compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger. . . for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath." (Hosea 11:3-4, 8-9).

The Hebrew prophets lay out the pattern that is picked up in the Christian writings, even as they mingle with the wisdom of Gentiles and become "a new song."

Something beautiful happened; and even without understanding it, we joyously celebrate it every year as the sky grows dark and the nights long. In some mysterious way, the infinite divine is caught in a human body, invisible light made visible. The gospels record how Jesus was remembered by different communities in different parts of the Roman Empire—a story too precious to be contained by one narrative. The story of Incarnation describes an upside-down world, and even now it is difficult to bear its intensity. In the parables, everyone acts crazy: a father rewards the son whose whoring and gambling loses half of his wealth; an outsider helps someone left for dead by the side of the road when religious leaders turn away. A crazy woman is one of Jesus's close companions and the disciple chosen by him to first preach the gospel of Resurrection. We are called to recognize Christ in the faces of the hungry, sick, and imprisoned. This is a world that did not make sense two thousand years ago, and it does not make sense now. And yet these are the stories told to reveal who God is.

Perhaps the most shocking element of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the story that we are celebrating right now: the story of his birth. Because it is so tangled up with songs blared from store loudspeakers bidding us to rock around the Christmas tree, we may overlook that this is the heart of the doctrine of the Incarnation. In this story, the Most High, who laid the foundation of the earth and shut in the sea with doors (Job 38-41), appears as a tiny baby. The "breath of the power of God" (Wisdom 7:25) enters our world through the body of an unwed peasant girl to lie in animals' straw in a barn at the outskirts of a tiny village in an occupied territory. Herod's act of terror immediately forces his family to flee their precarious shelter. These are the root symbols of what God-with-us looks like.

To make clear the contrast between the kind of power embodied in Jesus Christ and that of Rome, the early Christians transposed the language of the cult of the emperor and applied it to Christ.^[3] His kingdom is a paradoxical counterpoint to Caesar's empire: beggars, peasants, married and unmarried women, unemployed, day laborers, and tax collectors are its dignitaries. The king is a wanderer whose tattered robes bring healing. He is praised not by court poets and sycophants but by shepherds and angels.

This counter-narrative is not obviously attractive. Watching the news, we see that people prefer leaders who are capable of enforcing their will. It is not obvious why the Christian path would be attractive, since its deity apparently lacked either the desire or the ability to free people from persecution or suffering. But those who were illuminated by this path became intoxicated by the counter-narrative of radical love and compassion that extended fellowship not according to kin or ethnic ties but to humanity itself. Christians no longer believed that social standing or even death itself defined who they were. In these quixotic communities, someone whom society perceived as a slave or an abused wife might be a leader. Christians could be fearless of death as they attended plague victims, brought help to prisoners in Roman mines or faced Rome's most cruel tortures.^[4]

In the modern period, Christians emphasize belief as the primary act of piety. But early Christians understood the significance of the Incarnation differently: allegiance must either be to the gospel of

Jesus Christ or to the gospel of Caesar. We have a sense of the meaning of this choice for the gospel of Incarnation in the prison diary of Perpetua, a young Roman mother who was arrested in 203. A witness to her death describes her going into the stadium with milk dripping from her breasts but with a “shining countenance and calm step, as the beloved of God, as a wife of Christ, putting down everyone’s stare by her own intense gaze.” After she is first stripped and then gored, she is reported to have said to her fellow Christians: “You must all stand fast in the faith and love one another, and do not be weakened by what we have gone through.”^[5] Perpetua’s witness is not simply to a belief that she will go to heaven or that Jesus is lord but to the *meaning* of the Incarnation: stand fast and love one another. Allegiance to this gospel, even *in extremis*, was for Perpetua and her fellow prisoners the primary content of faith. Enchanted by this gospel, it was *impossible* to stomach the cruelty of the Empire’s practices or the emptiness of its theology. Perpetua saw herself so clearly in the gospel that it became impossible to betray herself.

The Incarnation invites us, like Israel and Perpetua, to recognize who we really are. American slaves who sang about having “shoes in that kingdom” were not only consoling themselves with a fantasy of a better future. They sang out their true names.^[6] When Jesus asks his disciples “Who do you say I am?” he is also asking “Who do you say you are?” Early Christians said Jesus was the Messiah, Compassion, Light. The Savior awakened sleepers who walked in the darkness of self-forgetfulness. Jesus was the emissary of a God whose name was not Caesar but Love. The desire to cleave to the gospel of Jesus Christ and its vision of absolute love made it impossible to accept the gospel of Caesar. It is a love that requires a sacrifice—not of a dove or goat but of one’s very personhood.

That God is love has become a banal slogan. In the musical version of *Oliver Twist*, it was painted in gray letters on the wall of the miserable orphanage. But, in the Second Letter of Peter, it makes us “participants in the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). The First Letter of John contrasts this gospel with idolatry. “Those who say ‘I love God’ and hate their brothers or sisters are liars. . . . Those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also” (1 John 4:19, 21). It concludes: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21). Anything less than love is idolatry and death.

In this season, we are invited to enter into this joy, but it is difficult to free ourselves from the idols of consumerism, hostility, or callousness. Christians may have little difficulty either ignoring the anguished cries of black America, indulging in demeaning depictions of Hispanic or Muslim neighbors, or remaining implacably indifferent to poverty and hunger. But this is the idolatry of imperial religion and is antithetical to the revelation of the Incarnation.

Yet, in our carols we will again sing out Christianity’s tender and wise theology of Incarnation. We are invited to recognize the contrast between royal indifference and solidarity. “Once in royal David’s city,” with the poor oppressed and lowly lived on earth our Savior holy.^[7] Not emperors but mothers exemplify the intimacy between Logos and the world: “In the bleak mid-winter,” seraphim thronged the air, but his mother only . . . worshipped the Beloved with a kiss.^[8] This Beloved offers a vision of universalized compassion: “Peace on earth and mercy mild.”^[9] In the joy of Christmas hope, we refuse the sorrows bred by callousness and indifference: “No more let sins and sorrow grow, nor thorns infest the ground.”^[10] We can follow a different way: “There’s a star in the east on Christmas morn. Rise up shepherd and follow.”^[11] Though “no ear can hear his coming,” when we open our hearts to him, the “the dear Christ enters in.”^[12] In this poetry of celebration, Christological creeds and doctrines live in us as intimacy between God and the oppressed, as tenderness between mother and child, as a new way to be in the world because this compassionate love “is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing.”^[13]

We may not be called to Perpetua's sacrifice. But even amidst the obfuscating and exhausting temptations of today's Imperial powers, perhaps we will rekindle the joy of this crazy, off-kilter vision. The divine in us gives us eyes to see the divine in others and in that seeing, Christ is continually "born in us"—and, through us, reborn to the world.



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FOOTNOTES

[1] Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets: an Introduction*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), 17

[2] Ibid, 26.

[3] See John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome* (San Francisco: Harper, 2007) and Richard A. Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas: The Infancy Narratives in Social Context* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

[4] See Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003), chapter 1.

[5] From *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*. Texts and translation by Herbert Musurillo, available various places including <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/maps/primary/perpetua.html>

[6] See, for example, Cheryl A.Kirk-Duggan, "African-American Spirituals: Confronting and Exorcising Evil through Song," in Emilie M. Townes, ed., *A Troubling in My Soul* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1996) or James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2015), chapter 1.

[7] Henry John Gauntlett, "Once in Royal David's City"

[8] Christina Rossetti, "In the Bleak Mid-winter"

[9] Charles Wesley, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing"

[10] Isaac Watts, "Joy to the World"

[11] African American Spiritual: "Rise up, Shepherd, and Follow"

[12] Phillips Brooks, "O Little Town of Bethlehem"

[13] William Chatterton Dix, "What Child is This"

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