

GOD
WITH US

READER'S
EDITION

GOD WITH US

*Rediscovering the
Meaning of Christmas*

BETH BEVIS
SCOTT CAIRNS
EMILIE GRIFFIN
RICHARD JOHN NEUHAUS
KATHLEEN NORRIS
EUGENE PETERSON
LUCI SHAW

EDITED BY GREG PENNOYER & GREGORY WOLFE



PARACLETE PRESS
BREWSTER, MASSACHUSETTS

God with Us: Rediscovering the Meaning of Christmas - Reader's Edition

2015 First Printing this Edition

Copyright © 2007 by Greg Pennoyer

ISBN: 978-1-61261-707-7

Scripture quotations designated NRSV are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations designated RSV are taken from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1952 [2nd edition, 1971] by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations designated NJB are taken from The New Jerusalem Bible, copyright 1985 by Darton, Longman & Todd, Ltd. and Doubleday, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc. Reprinted by permission.

Scripture quotations designated REB are from the *Revised English Bible* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

Scripture quotations designated THE MESSAGE are taken from *The Message* by Eugene H. Peterson, copyright ©1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations designated (KJV) are taken from the King James Version.

Title page art: Giotto di Bondone. *Nativity*. Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, Italy. Scala/Art Resource, NY.

The original edition of *God with Us* was cataloged by the Library of Congress as follows:

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

God with us : rediscovering the meaning of Christmas / Scott Cairns ... [et al.] ;

edited by Greg Pennoyer and Gregory Wolfe.

p. cm. ISBN 978-1-55725-541-9

1. Advent—Meditations. 2. Christmas—Meditations. 3. Epiphany—Meditations. I. Cairns, Scott. II. Pennoyer, Greg. III. Wolfe, Gregory.

BV40.G58 2007

242'.33—dc22

2007021985

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in an electronic retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Published by Paraclete Press

Brewster, Massachusetts

www.paracletepress.com

Printed in the United States of America

Contents

Preface vii

Introduction 1

Eugene Peterson

Living the Church Year: An Invitation 11

FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT 17

Richard John Neuhaus

SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT 45

Scott Cairns

THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT 73

Luci Shaw

FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT 95

Kathleen Norris

DECEMBER 25 Christmas Day

FROM CHRISTMAS TO EPIPHANY 127

Emilie Griffin

HISTORIES OF THE FEAST DAYS

Beth Bevis

DECEMBER 6	Feast of Saint Nicholas	35
DECEMBER 8	The Conception of the Virgin Mary	63
DECEMBER 24	Christmas Eve	109
DECEMBER 25	Christmas Day or The Nativity of Our Lord	117
DECEMBER 26	Feast of Saint Stephen	125
DECEMBER 27	Feast of Saint John the Evangelist	131
DECEMBER 28	Feast of the Holy Innocents	137
JANUARY 1	Feast of Mary the Mother of God	147
JANUARY 6	Feast of the Epiphany Holy Family or The First Sunday after Christmas	159 165
Notes		171
Acknowledgments		177
Contributors		179
Editors		181

Greg
Pennoyer
Preface

THIS BOOK IS THE RESULT OF A JOURNEY that began on Christmas morning, 1998, in Ottawa in a small Anglo-Catholic church called St. Barnabas. It was my first encounter with what my high church friends call “smells and bells.” Throughout that Christmas service a translucent ribbon of incense lingered just above eye level. Its constant presence provided a gentle introduction to the physical elements of the Christmas service that I had not experienced before—the Eucharist, the processions, the sights, sounds, and, yes, smells.

It was a mystery to me at the time, but I left the church that Christmas morn with a sense that I had worshipped God with all my senses—with my whole being—for the first time in my life.

My journey into the heart of the church’s liturgical and spiritual theology continues, but in a strange way it keeps returning me, again and again, to Christmas day. For it is in this great feast—in the celebration of the Incarnation, the Word made flesh—that I can begin to see what an embodied faith might mean.

Like most adults, I have a difficult time relating to Christmas. Having lost the wonder of childhood I try to make up for it through our peculiarly modern mixture of materialism and sentimentality. For me, as for so many people (including millions of believers), Christmas has become a parody of itself.

The more I reflected on my experience at St. Barnabas, the more I realized that my own temptation to sentimentalize Christmas involved turning away from the messiness of my disenchanting, adult life. Christmas is, after all, the story of the Creator entering into his creation—a creation that has been marred by human sin

and weakness. It is the story of a God who does not disdain this world, despite its frailty, ambiguities, and messiness. The God who became a helpless babe in a stable entered into our human anxieties and confusions and redeemed them.

Christmas is the feast of the Incarnation, which is the mystery of God with us in the flesh. When we cut through the sentiment and marketing to the spiritual riches of Christmas, we recover not only a sense of who God is, but also who *we* are as human beings.

Such a recovery cannot happen in a day. One of the things I have learned about the ancient church is that it knew that real, lasting change comes about over time, which is why it set aside whole seasons for meditation and celebration of the great mysteries of faith. And so the early Christians set Christmas in the larger context of the Advent season that precedes it and the Epiphany season that extends its meaning outward from Bethlehem to the whole world. To live through these seasons is to embark on a pilgrimage through time.

God With Us is intended as a companion and guide for those who would make this journey. Each of the elements of this book—daily meditations, Scripture selections, prayers, histories of the major feast days, selected classic and contemporary artwork—can help us along the path. Together, they weave together the rich tapestry of Christmas, calling us to an embodied faith, one that finds redemption in the messiness of our lives and encounters the divine in the ordinary stuff of this world.

God with us. This is the meaning of the Incarnation. This is the meaning of Christmas.

—GREG PENNOYER

Eugene
Peterson
Introduction

BIRTH: WONDER . . . ASTONISHMENT . . .
adoration. There can't be very many of us for whom the sheer fact of existence hasn't rocked us back on our heels. We take off our sandals before the burning bush. We catch our breath at the sight of a plummeting hawk. "Thank you, God." We find ourselves in a lavish existence in which we feel a deep sense of kinship—we *belong* here; we say thanks with our lives to Life. And not just "Thanks" or "Thank It" but "Thank *You*." Most of the people who have lived on this planet earth have identified this You with God or gods. This is not just a matter of learning our manners, the way children are taught to say thank you as a social grace. It is the cultivation of adequateness within ourselves to the nature of reality, developing the capacity to sustain an adequate response to the overwhelming gift and goodness of life.

Wonder is the only adequate launching pad for exploring this fullness, this wholeness, of human life. Once a year, each Christmas, for a few days at least, we and millions of our neighbors turn aside from our preoccupations with life reduced to biology or economics or psychology and join together in a community of wonder. The wonder keeps us open-eyed, expectant, alive to life that is always more than we can account for, that always exceeds our calculations, that is always beyond anything we can make.

If in the general festive round of singing and decorating, giving and receiving, cooking meals and family gatherings, we

ask what is behind all this and what keeps it going all over the world, among all classes of people quite regardless of whether they believe or not, the answer is simply “a birth.” Not just “birth” in general, but a particular birth in a small Middle Eastern village in datable time—a named baby, Jesus—a birth that soon had people talking and singing about God, indeed, *worshiping* God.

This invites reflection. For birth, simply as birth, even though often enough greeted with wonder and accompanied with ceremony and celebration, has a way of getting absorbed into business as usual far too soon. The initial impulses of gratitude turn out to be astonishingly ephemeral. Birth in itself does not seem to compel belief in God. There are plenty of people who take each new life on its own terms and deal with the person just as he or she comes to us, no questions asked. There is something very attractive about this: it is so clean and uncomplicated and noncontroversial. And obvious. They get a satisfying sense of the inherently divine in life itself without all the complications of church: the theology, the mess of church history, the hypocrisies of church-goers, the incompetence of pastors, the appeals for money. Life, as life, seems perfectly capable of furnishing them with a spirituality that exults in beautiful beaches and fine sunsets, surfing and skiing and body massage, emotional states and aesthetic titillation without investing too much God-attentiveness in a baby.

But for all its considerable attractions, this shift of attention from birth to aspects of the world that please us on our terms is considerably deficient in person. Birth means that a *person* is alive in the world. A miracle of sorts, to be sure, but a miracle that very soon gets obscured by late-night feedings, diapers,

fevers, and inconvenient irruptions of fussiness and squalling. Soon the realization sets in that we are in for years and years of the child's growing-up time that will stretch our stamina and patience, sometimes to the breaking point.

So how did it happen that *this* birth, this *Jesus* birth managed to set so many of us back on our heels in astonishment and gratitude and wonder? And continues to do so century after century, at least at this time of year?

The brief answer is that this wasn't just any birth. The baby's parents and first witnesses were convinced that God was entering human history in human form. Their conviction was confirmed in angel and Magi and shepherds visitations; eventually an extraordinary life came into being before their eyes, right in their neighborhood. More and more people became convinced. Men, women, and children from all over the world continue to be convinced right up to the present moment.

Birth, every human birth, is an occasion for local wonder. In Jesus' birth the wonder is extrapolated across the screen of all creation and all history as a God-birth. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us"—moved into the neighborhood, so to speak. And for thirty years or so, men and women saw God in speech and action in the entirely human person of Jesus as he was subject, along with them, to the common historical conditions of, as Charles Williams once put it, "Jewish religion, Roman order, and Greek intellect." These were not credulous people and it was not easy for them to believe, but they did. That God was made incarnate as a human baby is still not easy to believe, but people continue to do so. Many, even those who don't "believe," find themselves happy to participate in the giving and receiving, singing and celebrating of those who do.

Incarnation, *in-flesh-ment*, God in human form in Jesus entering our history: this is what started Christmas. This is what keeps Christmas going.



Christmas, and the Incarnation that it celebrates, has its foundation in creation. The Genesis stories of creation begin with “heaven and earth,” but that turns out to be merely a warm-up exercise for the main event, the creation of human life, man and woman designated as the “image of God.” Man and woman are alive with the very breath (“spirit”) of God. If we want to look at creation full, creation at its highest, we look at a person—a man, a woman, a child. There are those who prefer to gaze on the beauty of a bouquet of flowers rather than care for a squabbling baby, or to spend a day on the beach rather than rub shoulders with uncongenial neighbors in a cold church—creation without the inconvenience of persons. This may be understandable, but it is also decidedly not creation in the terms that have been revealed to us in Genesis and in the person of Jesus.

All this arrives as most welcome good news in the birth of Jesus: here we have creation as God’s gift of life, creation furnishing all the conditions necessary for life—*our* lives. Good news, truly, what the Greeks named a *kerygma*, a public proclamation that becomes a historical event. The birth of Jesus is the kerygmatic focus for receiving, entering into, and participating in creation, for *living* the creation and not just using it or taking it for granted.

In the first chapter of St. John’s Gospel, his re-writing of Genesis, we read, “the Word became flesh and dwelt among

us.” St. Matthew and St. Luke begin their Gospel stories with detailed accounts of Jesus’ birth. St. Paul in his letter to the Colossians, the first written reference to Jesus’ birth, calls Jesus the “first-born of all creation.”

Creation is God’s work, not ours. We accept and enter into and submit to what God does—what God made and makes. We are not spectators of creation but participants in it. We are participants first of all by simply being born, but then we realize that our births all take place in the defining context of Jesus’ birth. The Christian life is the practice of living in what God has done and is doing. We want to know the origins of things so that we can live out of our origins. We don’t want our lives to be tacked on to something peripheral. We want to live *origin*-ally, not derivatively.

So we begin with Jesus. Jesus is the revelation of the God who created heaven and earth; he is also the revelation of the God who is with us, Immanuel. The original Genesis creation, the stories of Israel, the lamentations of the prophets, the singing of the psalms—all of these make sense in light of that one birth that we celebrate at Christmas. The theologian Karl Barth goes into immense detail (he wrote four fat volumes on it) to make this single point: “We have established that from every angle Jesus Christ is the key to the secret of creation.”



The conception and birth of Jesus is the surprise of creation. “This is God’s initiative going beyond anything man or woman has dreamed of.” This is the birth that will now set all births under the conditions of God’s creative initiative.

By stating that Jesus is “born of woman”—this Mary (as both St. Matthew and St. Luke attest)—St. Paul insists that Jesus is most emphatically human, the “firstborn of all *creation*.” That this Mary is at the same time a virgin prevents the birth of Jesus from being reduced to what we know or can reproduce from our own experience. Life that is unmistakably *human* life is before us here, a real baby from an actual mother’s womb; there is also miracle here, and mystery that cannot be brushed aside in our attempts to bring the operations of God, let alone our own lives, under our control. The miracle of the virgin birth, maintained from the earliest times in the church and confessed in its creeds, is, in Karl Barth’s straightforward phrase, a “summons to *reverence* and *worship*. . . .” Barth maintained that the one-sided views of those who questioned or denied that Jesus was “born of the virgin Mary” are “in the last resort to be understood only as coming from dread of reverence and only as invitation to comfortable encounter with an all too near or all too far-off God.”

Artists, poets, musicians, and architects are our primary witnesses to the significance of the meaning of *virgin* in the virgin birth as “a summons to reverence and worship.” Over and over again they rescue us from a life in which the wonder has leaked out. While theologians and biblical scholars have argued, sometimes most contentiously, over texts, sexual facts, and mythological parallels, our artists have painted Madonnas, our poets have provided our imaginations with rhythms and metaphors, our musicians have filled the air with carols and anthems that bring us to our knees in adoration, and our architects have designed and built chapels and cathedrals in which we can worship God.

Madeleine L’Engle’s poem “After Annunciation” tells us why:

This is the irrational season
 When love blooms bright and wild.
 Had Mary been filled with reason
 There'd have been no room for the child.

Conception, pregnancy, and birth language that features God as the Creator occupy a prominent place in our Scriptures as they give witness to the Christian life. Jesus' words to Nicodemus about being "born anew" are certainly the most well known. Jesus and Nicodemus between them use the word *born* seven times in the course of their conversation. In an extravagant metaphor Paul sees the entire creation groaning "as if in the pangs of childbirth" in his letter to the Romans. Another time he identified himself to the Galatians as a mother in the pains of childbirth.

The story of Jesus' birth is our entry into understanding and participating in our place in creation. But every birth can, if we let it, return us to the wonder of Jesus' birth, the revelation of sheer life as gift, God's life with us and for us.

God is the Creator, and his most encompassing creation is human life, a baby. We, as participants in creation, do it too. When we beget and conceive, give birth to and raise babies, we are in on the heart of creation. There is more gospel in all those "begats" in the genealogical lists of our Scriptures ("And Ezekias begat Manasses; and Manasses begat Amon; and Amon begat Josias . . .") than we ever dreamed.

Birth, any birth, is our primary access to the creative work of God. And we birth much more than human babies. Our lives give birth to God's kingdom every day—or, at least, they should. And Jesus' virgin birth provides and maintains the focus that God himself is personally present and totally participant in creation;

this is good news, indeed. Every birth is kerygmatic. The birth of Jesus, kept fresh in our imaginations and prayers in song and story, keeps our feet on solid ground and responsive to every nuance of obedience and praise evoked by the life all around us.



But the actual birth of Jesus has never been an easy truth for people to swallow. There are always plenty of people around who will have none of this particularity: human ordinariness, body fluid, raw emotions of anger and disgust, fatigue and loneliness. Birth is painful. Babies are inconvenient and messy. There is immense trouble in having children. God having a baby? It's far easier to accept God as the creator of the majestic mountains, the rolling sea, and the delicate wild flowers.

When it comes to the sordid squalor of the raw material involved in being human, God is surely going to keep his distance. Or, is he? We may fantasize deep aspirations native to our souls that abhor this business of diapers and debts, government taxes and domestic trivia. Deep in our bones we may have the sense that we must have been created for higher things, that there is a world of subtle ideas and fine feelings and exquisite ecstasies for us to cultivate.

Somewhere along the way some of us become convinced that *our* souls are *different*—a cut above the masses, the common herd of philistines that trample the courts of the Lord. Such people become connoisseurs of the sublime.

As it turned out, the ink was barely dry on the stories telling of the birth of Jesus before people were busy putting out alternate stories that were more “spiritual” than those provided in our

Gospels. A rash of apocryphal stories, with Jesus smoothed out and universalized, flooded the early church. They were immensely popular. They still are. And people are still writing them. These alternate stories prove very attractive to a lot of people.

In these accounts of the Christian life, the hard-edged particularities of Jesus' life are blurred into the sublime divine. The hard, historical factuality of the Incarnation, the Word made flesh as God's full and complete revelation of himself, is dismissed as crude. Something finer and more palatable to sensitive souls is put in its place: "Jesus was not truly flesh and blood, but entered a human body temporarily in order to give us the inside story on God and initiate us into the secrets of the spiritual life." And, "Of course he didn't die on the cross, but made his exit at the last minute. The body that was taken from the cross for burial was not Jesus at all, but a kind of costume he used for a few years and then discarded."

It turns out in these versions that Jesus merely role-played a historical flesh-and-blood Christ for a brief time and then returned to a purely spiritual realm. If we accept that version of Jesus, we are then free to live the version: we put up with materiality and locale and family for as much and as long as necessary, but only for as much and as long as necessary. The material, the physical, the body—history and geography and weather, *people*—are temporary scaffolding; the sooner we realize that none of it has anything to do with God and Jesus, the better.



The attractions of employing this temporary scaffolding are considerable. For those of us who take this point of view, the

feature attraction is that we no longer have to take seriously either things or people. Anything we can touch, smell, or see is not of God in any direct or immediate way. We save ourselves an enormous amount of inconvenience and aggravation by putting materiality and everydayness at the edge of our lives, at least our spiritual lives. Mountains are nice as long as they inspire lofty thoughts, but if one stands in the way of our convenience, a bulldozer can be called in to get rid of it. Other people are glorious as long as they are good-looking and well-mannered, bolster our self-esteem, and help us fulfill our human potential, but if they somehow bother us they certainly deserve to be dismissed.

But it's hard to maintain this view of things through the Christmas season. There is too much stuff, too many *things*. And all of it festively connects up with Jesus and God. Every year Christmas comes around again and forces us to deal with God in the context of demanding and inconvenient children; gatherings of family members, many of whom we spend the rest of the year avoiding; all the crasser forms of greed and commercialized materiality; garish lights and decorations. Or maybe the other way around: Christmas forces us to deal with all the mess of our humanity in the context of God who has already entered that mess in the glorious birth of Jesus.

Beth Bevis
**Living the
Church Year:
An Invitation**

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO “LIVE THE CHURCH year”? Our goal is to recover a more ancient way of looking at time and the mysterious relationship between the material and spiritual realms.

The early Christians believed that the rhythm of the year gave us a perfect opportunity to re-enact the story of our salvation. In the holy days and seasons of the church year, the life of Christ and the entirety of human history are recapitulated. The eternal is aligned with the here and now.

God With Us is an introduction to the first three “seasons” of the Church calendar. Advent begins this sacred year because it looks forward to Christ’s birth, the event that brings about the “new creation” of a people redeemed by God. Christmas celebrates Christ’s Incarnation and Epiphany his “manifestation” to the whole world.

Later, in Lent, we have another time of preparation as we look to the Passion on Good Friday and the Resurrection on Easter Sunday. After the Easter season comes Pentecost, which recounts the descent of the Holy Spirit on the disciples and the beginning of the church’s life on earth. Finally, the long season of “ordinary time” after Pentecost reminds us of the story we are living now: the church in time. At the end of ordinary time we look to the end of time . . . and then with Advent we begin the cycle again.

Another layer of the Church year involves remembering those in human history who have lived extraordinarily holy lives, and who thus serve as models for us. So the seasons are punctuated by memorial days that celebrate the saints and martyrs of the church.

The act of remembering becomes effective in our lives only when we share that memory with others. We do that through worship, and in particular through the corporate act of worship known as liturgy. The Greek word for liturgy means “the work of the people.” It is constituted by the actions we take—the physical gestures, prayers, or other customs—that make faith a tangible presence in our lives.

Liturgy, too, is incarnational, involving our bodily and sensory participation in worship. Each season in the liturgical year, then, comes with its own set of traditions—sights, smells, and sounds that involve our senses; and readings, prayers, and practices that call us to undertake certain activities. Each of the seasons and holy days of the church year is marked by practices that reflect the meaning of that season or day. There are times for feasting and for fasting, preparation and celebration.

The brief histories of the major feast days that follow include information about the traditions, both liturgical and popular, that have become associated with the seasons of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. The meaning of the Incarnation unfolds for us in the myriad gestures of prayer and worship that help us to align our lives with the rhythm of the church year.

FIRST WEEK OF
ADVENT

Beth Bevis

History of the Feast

First Sunday of Advent

WHEN SOMEONE WE LOVE COMES TO VISIT—when a child returns home for a holiday or an old friend from far away finally comes to town—we are full of anticipation and prepare to receive our guest with joy. We may even clean the house and polish the silver.

So it is with Advent, the season set aside by the ancient Christian communities to prepare for the mystery we are about to celebrate at Christmas: the arrival of God with us, God incarnate.

The season of Advent begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas. While our contemporary consumer culture begins the process of celebrating Christmas right after Thanksgiving—with relentless marketing and an endless soundtrack of carols and songs—liturgical tradition takes a different approach. In liturgical churches you won't hear carols or see a Christmas tree in the sanctuary during Advent—those festivities are reserved for Christmas. Advent, by contrast, is a more solemn season of preparation and anticipation. We set aside these four weeks to prepare ourselves to receive this great mystery into our hearts.

In some churches, beginning on the first Sunday of Advent, several changes become evident. According to tradition, the usual “Gloria in Excelsis” in the Sunday liturgy is omitted. Clergy wear robes of purple—the same color worn during Lent—to remind us of the solemn nature of the season.

These changes alert us to the fact that Advent is also a time to practice certain spiritual disciplines. Just as we might clean our

house in preparation for the arrival of a special guest, so church tradition asks us to take stock of our souls and be at our best when the special day arrives.

Christians through the ages have looked upon this combination of celebration and solemnity not as a contradiction, but as a meaningful paradox. The practice of self-discipline during Advent helps us to make more room for joy so that we are fully prepared to receive the Lord when he comes.

The Advent wreath is perhaps the most beloved of many Advent traditions, both in the home and in the church. Wreaths are fashioned out of evergreens and decorated with four candles, one for each Sunday leading up to Christmas. Sometimes a fifth candle, representing Christ, is placed in the center of the wreath and is lit at Christmas. Advent wreaths function as a focus for family prayer during these weeks: parents say prayers of preparation for Christ's arrival, and children often help to light candles in the wreath. Each Sunday candles are lit in order to mark the progression of time and increase our sense of anticipation as we approach the day of Christ's birth. The candle flame is a reminder of the light that comes into the world at Christmas.

Throughout Advent, Christians prepare their hearts not only for the celebration of Christmas, but also for the many ways that Christ breaks into the world—past, present, and future. We prepare for the celebration of the anniversary of God's first coming into the world; we prepare for the many ways in which he comes to us now; and we look forward to his future coming in glory at the end of time.

Richard John Neuhaus

First Sunday of Advent

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 2:1–5; Psalm 121;

Romans 13:11–14;

Matthew 24:37–44

WE ARE ALL SEARCHING, AND ULTIMATELY—whether we know it or not—we are searching for God. Ultimately, we are searching for the Ultimate, and the Ultimate is God. It is not easy, searching for God, but maybe your reading this book is part of your own searching. The fact is that we do not really *know* what we’re looking for or who we’re looking for. Almost a thousand years ago, St. Anselm of Canterbury said, “God is that greater than which cannot be thought.”

Think about it. We can stretch our minds as high and deep and far as our minds can stretch, and at the point of the highest, deepest, farthest stretch of our minds, we have not “thought” God. There is always a thought beyond what we are able to think. “God is that greater than which cannot be thought.”

God is, quite literally, inconceivable. And that is why God was conceived as a human being in the womb of the Virgin Mary. Because we cannot, even in thought, rise up to God, God stooped down to us in Jesus, who is “Emmanuel,” which means “God with us.”

As we are searching for God, the good news is that God is searching for us. Better yet, he has found us. The great question is not whether we have found God but whether we have found ourselves being found by God. God is not lost. *We* were, or, as the

case may be, we *are*. There are many ways of being lost. Listen to the words of Jesus in Matthew 24. As in the days of Noah before that great flood, we were lost in eating and drinking, in marrying and giving in marriage. In a word, we were lost in living what we told ourselves was the good life. We wanted more and more of it, and the more we had of it the more we longed for what was beyond the reach of our longing or the grasp of our possessing. In our longing and our searching, we were blind to the gift already given, Emmanuel: God with us.

Here is what St. Paul says: “It is full time now for you to wake from sleep.” He is telling us to wake up to the gift already given. This season of the Church’s calendar is called Advent, which means “coming.” Christ came, Christ comes, Christ will come again. There is no time—past, present, or future—in which Jesus the Christ (which means Jesus the anointed one) is not God with us. He was with you yesterday, is with you today, and will be with you tomorrow. So we are invited to give up our searching and let ourselves be found by the One who wants to be with us, and to have us with him, forever.

We are forever seeking, while the forever for which we seek is now. Awaken to the truth that any place contains every place and every moment contains eternity. And that is because Christ is Emmanuel, the One whom the Book of Revelation calls the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. (Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. We might say that he is the A and the Z.) He is the Word of God who called into being everything that is or ever has been or ever will be. He is the One in whom past, present, and future are always now.

Seekers and searchers of all times have looked toward the heavens in order to find God. Then the gift was given. Mary’s searching was

interrupted by an angel who promised that soon, very soon, in a matter of nine months, she would look not up but down, into the face of the baby in her arms, into the face of God. This is called *incarnation*, meaning that God is enfleshed in our humanity.

She said to the angel, “Let it be to me according to your word.” And so it was. And so it is with all who, wearied by their searching, wake up to the gift already given; so it is with all who wake up to find themselves found by Emmanuel, God with us.

Father in heaven, you came to earth in the person of your Son, Jesus Christ. As the coming of your Spirit upon Mary inspired her to welcome the One who is her child and her lord, so also open our eyes to the gift already given. Forgive us our restless searching for your presence according to our expectations. Direct our searching according to your gift. May we, like the star-led sages of old, be ever guided to the appointed meeting place in the Child of Bethlehem.

In him and by him, let us be found by you. With your apostle Paul we would put on the Lord Jesus Christ, wearing his humility as our robe of splendor. Forbid that we seek any glory that is not his. In his childhood, we become as little children. In his teaching, we are trained to delight you by our service. In his miracles, we are changed, like water into wine, our vain ambitions transformed into obedience to your call. In his suffering and death, we share in his victory over every wrong within us and without.

Fill, we pray you, our every moment with his threefold advent. As then he came and now he comes and will one day come again, awaken us to the then and now and one day of his presence in this present moment. As we put on the Lord Jesus Christ, may all our time be clothed by eternity until we find ourselves at last in the home you have prepared for seekers and searchers who, in our seeking and searching, were hopelessly lost. Give us, we pray, the grace to surrender to being found.

This we ask in the name above every name, the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Let it be.

First Monday of Advent

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 2:1–5;

Matthew 8:5–11, 13

MATTHEW'S GOSPEL TELLS US ABOUT THE centurion at Capernaum who asks Jesus to heal his servant in distress. "I will come and heal him," says Jesus. To which the centurion responds, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only say the word, and my servant will be healed." Jesus says the word and the servant is healed. Of the Roman centurion he then says, "Not even in Israel have I found such faith."