

"What Child is This?"

Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25

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Do we have any *Love Actually* fans here this morning?

For those of you who haven't seen this 20-year-old, sappy, Christmas staple, here's the synopsis:

Mostly filmed on location in London, the screenplay delves into different aspects of love as shown through ten separate stories involving a wide variety of individuals, many of whom are shown to be interlinked as the tales progress. The story begins five weeks before Christmas and is played out in a weekly countdown until the holiday, followed by an epilogue that takes place one month later.

Hugh Grant's opening monologue, I think, is the best part of the movie:

Whenever I get gloomy with the state of the world, I think about the arrivals gate at Heathrow Airport. General opinion's starting to make out that we live in a world of hatred and greed, but I don't see that. It seems to me that love is everywhere. Often, it's not particularly dignified or newsworthy, but it's always there – fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, husbands and wives, boyfriends, girlfriends, old friends. When the planes hit the Twin Towers, as far as I know, none of the phone calls from the people on board were messages of hate or revenge – they were all messages of love. If you look for it, I've got a sneaky feeling you'll find that love actually is all around.

Although critics' response to *Love Actually* was mixed, the film is popular among audiences and has been discussed as an arguable modern-day Christmas classic.

Carla Meyer of the *San Francisco Chronicle* opined "[it] abandons any pretext of sophistication for gloppy sentimentality, sugary pop songs and bawdy humor – an approach that works about half the time ... most of the story lines maintain interest because of the fine cast and general goodwill of the picture."

I think this is interesting because movies like this are popular because they strike a deep chord within the human psyche satisfying our need for *connection with others*—if only vicariously. *Rootless. Alienated. Estranged. Meaningless.* The human condition can be a desperate mix of questions about the basics of “being.”

In fact, the longing for a sense of connection is at the root of the English word *religion*. The Latin *re-ligio* means to relink, to reconnect. So, to reconnect, relink, and restore people to relationship with one another and to the Divine is the heart of religion. Our *stories, rituals, ceremonies, and traditions* grow out of our collective effort to understand just what it takes to be *re-ligio-ed*.

This is important to understand because central to the biblical tradition is the notion that *truth* doesn’t come to us primarily as *fact, creed, or even scripture*. Rather, it is best conveyed through *story*. As our spiritual ancestors endeavored to sort out the process of *reconnection*, they did so by telling diverse stories to meet diverse human needs.

And the birth stories about Jesus are a case in point.

Think of it this way: the earliest disciples experienced the *Spirit of Life* in Jesus in a way that made his presence so *transformational* for people that the only way they felt they could describe their experience was by attributing it to the Divine.

Grounded in the prophetic tradition of Judaism, the historical Jesus was your standard issue human being, but one who had a unique and powerful way of expressing compassion, righteous indignation, and visions for a just world, all wrapped up with the integrity to die for those convictions.¹

Brian McLaren put it this way:

*Jesus’s contemporaries didn’t just think he was a godly man. There were a lot of godly people. They didn’t simply take their pre-existing idea of God and claim that Jesus resembles that idea of God. What happened in their encounter with Jesus was much more radical than that. **They found themselves deconstructing their original idea of God in light of their experience with Jesus.** So they gradually moved into a new concept of God, one reimagined in the **image of Jesus**—God with us, not distant from us; God who suffers with and for us, not one who inflicts suffering upon*

¹ David M. Felten and Jeff Proctor-Murphy, *Living the Questions: The Wisdom of Progressive Christianity*, Harper One, New York, p. 183

us; a nonviolent God who forgives us as we torture him, not a God who threatens to torture us unless we submit.

McLaren, of course, is speaking of what theologians call the *incarnation*. *God in human flesh.*

As John Dominic Crossan put it: *"When I say, 'the incarnation,' here's what I mean: That as a Christian, if I want to give you my best explanation of what God looks like in sandals, I'm going to say 'Jesus.'"*

And this is the overall context of how the stories of Jesus's birth developed several decades after Jesus's death and resurrection. According to Reformed theologian, Doug Ottati, [speaking for the broad mainstream of contemporary theologians] *the narratives of Jesus's spiritual conception and virgin birth are imaginative mythopoeic discourses that make important theological points.*² For example, Christians who want to take Jesus seriously need to take his humanity seriously, for Jesus revealed what it means to be fully human. By living into the fullness of his humanity, Jesus demonstrated a way of being that could only be described by his early followers as divine. As Athanasius suggested even in the fourth century, *"He became what we are that he might make us what he is."*

Similarly, Robin Meyers says:

Incarnation means to me, that the Spirit of God was pleased to dwell fully in Jesus of Nazareth. He was a reflection of God ... when people looked at him, and listened to him, and received his ministry they felt the presence of God in some powerful and definitive way. That's the Incarnation, [and it's] very important for us to hang on to. It's one of the things that makes Christianity unique. There's really no other world religion that is so fully grounded in a person, in a human being.

And this has some specific implications for 21st-century people like us who live in an increasingly *pluralistic and secular world*. For instance, the seventeenth-century English poet, John Donne, tells the story of one man's search for God. When told that God lived at the top of a mountain at the end of the earth, he makes the journey there and begins to climb. At the same time, God thinks, *"What can I do to show my people I love them?"* So God decides to travel down from the mountain

²² Douglas F. Ottati, *A Theology for the 21st Century*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, 2020, p. 435

and live among the people as one of them. As God goes down the *opposite side of the mountain* from the man climbing up, *they miss one another*. At the summit, the man discovers an empty mountaintop. Heartbroken, he concludes *that God must not exist*.

However—despite speculation to the contrary, God doesn't live on mountaintops, at the ends of the earth, or even in "*some heaven, light years away*." Rather, from the mystics of old to today's evolutionary theologians, the collective wisdom suggests *a profoundly intimate and interconnected Divinity*. The true "essence" of incarnation is God's indwelling in all of creation, from the smallest yet-to-be-identified particle to the furthest reaches of the cosmos.³

You see, limiting the Divine to one place or one time or one culture-bound expression creates barriers to deeper understandings of the mystery of life. Indoctrination into one way of thinking makes it difficult to change our ideas of God and Jesus and how they relate to one another.

John Shelby Spong suggests that, even in the midst of change there is hope:

*In the life of Jesus ... we still believe there was a literal experience of a living God. Maybe that forces us to rethink God and if we can stop thinking of God as a great big parent figure up in the sky—a supernatural being who is external to life—we can begin to think of God **as the power of life itself; the power of love itself, the "Ground of Being"** as Paul Tillich described it, which is always emerging in you and me and which emerged in Jesus of Nazareth in some remarkable kind of way that opens new doorways into the Holy for us.*

For process theologians like John Cobb, incarnation need not be an exercise in theological and cosmological gymnastics. Cobb points out that the Divine is (and always has been) intimately involved in "*every moment of human experience*."

In human beings, God is the source of novelty, of purpose, of meaning, of openness to others, of freedom, of responsibility, and much else besides. Far from diminishing our humanity, God is the giver of that humanity. The more fully God is present, the more fully we are human.

³ David M. Felten and Jeff Proctor-Murphy, *Living the Questions: The Wisdom of Progressive Christianity*, Harper One, New York, pp. 184-185

This means that God is “*in process*” with humanity, constantly changing and evolving with us. So despite the fact that each of us is a clumsy mix of good and bad—assumptions, prejudices, actions, and intentions—God is able to sometimes have God’s way with us. If there is any truth to the Christmas affirmation *God is with us*, then the Divine can’t be anything but involved in our affairs, getting dirty with us, and sometimes, because the Spirit is incarnate in us, effecting beauty in and through us.

Friends, for better or for worse, what we *do* is the measure of the incarnation in the world. Approaching life incarnationally can have consequences. One needs to be prepared for situations that take risk, that can be messy, that include *speaking out* or *standing up* for people; that might even mean making a *personal sacrifice* for someone else’s sake.

As Meister Eckhart, the fourteenth century German Catholic mystic, put it: “*What good is it to me that Mary gave birth to the son of God fourteen hundred years ago, and I do not also give birth to the Son of God in my time and in my culture? We are all meant to be mothers of God. God is always needing to be born.*”

This means that the incarnation is finally *not* just about Jesus but about *us*. *How will we respond to the call to make the love of God real in the world?*

Wherever we find ourselves, the mystery of life dwells within us, not limited to a time or place, but manifest in every aspect of our lives.⁴

⁴ Ibid., p. 187