

Merry Christmas.....and Happy Holidays. There is an interesting phenomenon that goes on this time of year: many people do not know what to say in regard to a seasonal greeting. Before I was ordained, I always found it interesting to observe who had trouble deciding between Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays. Some folks are real clear, sticking their hand out saying Merry Christmas, others are as clear with Happy Holidays, and then there is the vast middle ground where people are unsure what to say. Recently someone approached me, started with Happy Holidays, saw my collar and morphed to Merry Christmas. It was kind of like.... "HapMer Holmas."

I wonder if that un-comfortableness has more to do with not understanding, or perhaps a *fear of embracing*, the Incarnation of God. This un-comfortableness may also be a co-opting to the secular culture in which we live....We need to recognize that this is a momentous event we are celebrating: *God taking human form*, as a baby in a manger, *and living and being among us*. This is just monumental in scope and is *cause for great joy....and confusion*. This step by God, to live a human life with us, is done in a way that is totally unexpected.

Most of us are familiar with the story we just heard as recounted by Luke. This is such a normal, mundane situation....a pregnant Mary and her husband Joseph on their way to Joseph's home town for a tedious bureaucratic event, a census. This can be seen as all very normal, perhaps disappointingly so: should not God's entrance into the world as human be something more, well, spectacular? *These* kinds of expectations are how we misunderstand what this Incarnation really means. By God choosing to be born in a stable and not in a palace, this Prince of Peace is saying from the outset: "*change your expectations of what is about to happen*, of how the world operates." By our celebrating Jesus' birth into the world, we are allowing ourselves to upset those normal expectations.

Jesus' birth in this manner announces *a new normal*. This is not some otherworldly experience. The Incarnation of Jesus, of God come among us, is an announcing of the Kingdom of God that *has come among us*. The kingdom is here among us, *now*, in the day-to-day grittiness of our lives here on earth. Jesus has not come to take us away from that grittiness, but *to live with us in the grittiness* and to give us a new normal, a new way to see and be in the world, a new connectedness. And we find a bond with God in this connectedness.

This connectedness brings us closer to God and teaches us that we cannot remove ourselves from *the ordinary and normal and gritty life* we find around us; because it is in *this ordinary and normal and gritty life* that through this Incarnation, our new normal is born and found. By being connected to God we become part of the new normal. This new normal, this life with Christ, which is accessible to all, can then *become* normal, but not normal in a way that makes it mundane, but normal in a new way that is joyful and beautiful and wise.... and ultimately changes the world. And that is what the Incarnation does for us as we enter into Christmas, born anew with Christ: we manifestly turn normal into a new and different normal..... we manifestly turn the grittiness of the world into a new loveliness, based on a love that is available to all.

All of this may seem a bit obtuse sometimes. When I face a stumbling block such as can be found in trying to comprehend God being among us as a babe in a barn, I try different approaches to

prayer..... If any of you have seen my office, you know I have a penchant for icons. There is an ancient icon (a copy of which I do not, yet, possess) called Our Lady of Tenderness. This Icon was made in the 12th Century. In this icon, the female figure holding the child has her right hand underneath the child and her left hand is out-stretched in a peculiar fashion causing wonder at what that hand is doing. The spiritualist Henri Nouwen describes it this way:

At first I thought the Virgin pointed to Jesus with her open hand. I now realize that the word "point" misrepresents the true meaning of her gesture. She is not simply asking attention to her Son, nor is she directing us to him. That would be too external, manipulative and controlling. I have slowly come to see the Virgin's gesture as a gentle invitation to move closer to Jesus and discover in that movement the God to whom we belong.

A gentle invitation to move closer to Jesus and discover in that movement the God to whom we belong.... By our looking at the infant Jesus, by our moving closer to that mystery of God taking human form, we are taking a step into, and embracing, that non-discriminating love that God bestows upon any who step into that nearness. For this mystery of the Incarnation is one of those thin places in life where God is being made known to us: where God is being exposed to us. And what a joyful gift that is to those of us who want to live into that new normal being proclaimed this Christmas, that *new connectedness* to the world. By re-engaging in the birth of Jesus each year, we are being reminded that we can be born anew, we can enter into a new normal, where joy and love and hope and a world turned upside down, where all are welcome, becomes real and tangible and alive and among us.

The joyfulness we feel in our generosity in the gift giving and receiving that is such a prevalent part of the Christmas season provides a glimmer of this new normal Christ's birth provides for us. In *those moments of joy*, keep awake for you will find God right there with you, smiling at that generosity and the joy that can flow from those acts of kindness. We then must take that spirit that exists at those moments and transplant that into the new normal we proclaim tonight, making this joy and love a normal part of everyday life for all.

So, if you are more comfortable saying Happy Holidays to me, I'll say Happy Holidays right back at you.... Knowing in my heart that you may be trying to live into the un-comfortableness of this new normal we proclaim tonight/today. And that effort is helping to bring the kingdom alive, now, here.

A Blessed Christmas to each and every one of you. May each of you partake in an awakening to the joy that living into this new normal can provide by responding to that gentle invitation to move closer to this surprising Jesus and discover God's love is there for *all of us*. Merry Christmas.
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