



## **PUBLICATIONS--Manna: Food for the Journey of Spirituality**

### **Articles**

#### *The Incarnation: A Christmas Story*

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Advent is the time in the Christian year when we begin to look forward to the coming of the Light into the world. Each Sunday in Advent, we light candles in increasing number to symbolize the fact that the Light is coming. Then, late on Christmas Eve, we light the Christ-candle to portray the incredible truth that the Light of the world, Jesus Christ, has come forth from the womb of Mary and has entered our world as a flesh and blood human being. The Apostle John reminds us of this great truth in the opening to his Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:1,14

Here's how the Apostle Paul describes the same event:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. Phil 2:5-7

Paul says that Jesus Christ "made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant." Paul is talking about the incarnation of the Son of God.

But why? Why did the Second Person of the Trinity leave the majesty and beauty of the throne room of heaven to be born in a smelly stable in an insignificant village in Judea? Why did the Word become flesh and make his dwelling among us? Why did Jesus Christ, the Son of God, willingly endure the sufferings and hardships that we all face, including hunger and thirst, fatigue, temptation, rejection by his peers, abandonment by his friends, and finally an agonizing and horrible death? Why did God go through all that for us?

To help us understand the answer to that question, I would like to recount a story that I heard Paul Harvey tell many years ago. One snowy Christmas Eve, during an especially harsh Midwestern blizzard, an old farmer was sitting in his comfortable chair by the fireplace, book in hand, when he heard a thumping sound against his kitchen door. He didn't think much of it at first; after all it was a cold, windy night, so he returned to his reading. But when the thumping sound continued, the farmer put down his book and decided to investigate. When he entered the

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warm kitchen, he discovered that the thumping sound was being made by tiny sparrows that were flying into the glass in the kitchen door. At first the farmer could not understand the small birds' strange behavior; but then he realized that the tiny birds were attracted by the light and warmth coming through the window pane in the kitchen door. The farmer assumed that the sparrows would eventually realize that bumping their heads against the window pane was not going to get them anywhere, so he went back to his warm fire and continued with his book. Yet, the thumping sound did not stop. In fact, it seemed to increase in frequency. So the farmer returned to the kitchen, and sure enough, the sparrows were still flying into the window pane, hoping to escape the freezing snowy night and find the warmth of the light inside.

Being a kindly and compassionate old man, the farmer was saddened to think of the little sparrows suffering in the cold; therefore, he felt compelled to do something. So he bundled up in his heavy coat and scarf, put on his cap and earmuffs, and stepped into the bitter, windy cold outside. Slowly he tramped through the deep snow to the barn and pulled the huge barn doors wide-open so the sparrows could fly into safety. He even lit a lantern inside the barn so that the sparrows could more easily see the way in. Then he returned outside into the blizzard and began to wave his arms, trying to herd the sparrows in hopes that they would fly into the barn, where they would be safe from the wintry storm. Well, of course, that didn't work; that only seemed to scare the little birds further away from the barn. Next, he went back into the kitchen and grabbed a hand full of crackers from a canister in the cabinet. He went back outside and began to sprinkle a trail of crackers along the ground to try to lure the birds to the safety of the barn. Yet even that didn't work. Finally, in exasperation, the farmer went back inside the house and watched through the kitchen window as the sparrows huddled on the frozen branches outside, shivering in the freezing cold. Then, a thought occurred to him: "If only I could become a sparrow, just for a moment. Then they wouldn't be afraid of me, and I could show them the way to the barn." At that moment, the farmer realized he had grasped the true meaning of Christmas. God became one of us in order to lead us into the barn.

Doesn't that story illustrate something essential about the character of God? Doesn't that story tell us something about how God feels about you and me? Doesn't that story point toward the incredible love that God has for us. Like a heavenly sparrow who comes to take us into the barn, Jesus Christ swoops into the bitter cold of a dark night just so he can take us home with him. As Jesus said:

Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. John 14: 1-3, NKJV "In my Father's house are many mansions," says

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Jesus. Perhaps we could paraphrase that statement: In my Father's barn, there are plenty of warm, snug perches. I go to prepare a perch for you, so that where I am, you may be also.

The Incarnation is all about God's unfailing love and care for every one of us. Metaphorically speaking, God looked down from heaven and saw that his children were in trouble. He saw that we had lost our way, that we were confused in the darkness, like the sparrows flying against the window pane. And like any loving parent, he could not sit back and do nothing.

What parent or grandparent among us will sit back and do nothing while our children or grandchildren are in distress and need our help? What is it in us that will cause us to plunge into a frozen pond to save our children or rush into a burning building to rescue those we love? Where do we think we get that unstoppable desire to come to the aid of those we love most? Where does that kind of love and care come from? It comes from God, because that is the way God is, and we are made in God's image. So it should not be hard for us as parents and grandparents to understand that God could not leave his beloved children in the agony of darkness; he could not leave us shivering in the cold. Therefore, the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son of God, became one of us so that he could show us the way home. And again that is what this season is all about. The light has come into the world. The lantern is lit inside the barn and is beckoning us to safety and comfort.

If the incarnation tells us anything, it should shout to us how much God loves us. As the Apostle John put it in that well-known but too little appreciated passage, "For God so loved the WORLD that he gave his only begotten Son." As someone who has spent many years as a Christian counselor, I could wish nothing more than each one of us could fully realize how much God loves us. So many of the anxieties and concerns that plague us would simply lose their sting if we truly realized the eternal plans that God has for us, his beloved children. I am here to tell you that God is not mad at us, God is not looking for any and every opportunity to punish us, or as some would have it, to cast us into hell. That is not who our loving God is. God is not against us; God is for us. And that is what Christmas and the incarnation are all about!

Let me conclude by reminding you of the words of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He said:

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; *you are worth more than many sparrows.* Matt 10:29-31 (*ital.* added)