

CHRISTMAS - 2007
“A new way of being human”

At last, our world is quiet, at least the world of commerce. Most stores are closed. For a few short hours our attention turns to something other than making money. Government buildings are empty, lawmakers have gone home. There is something more important for them to do than to try to run the world or embarrass their opponents. College students are home from school. Even learning the wonders of science, business, philosophy and the arts is placed on the back burner for a few weeks. And those who are engaged in the violent business of war are taking time out to rest, to reconnect with families on the other side of the world. The distant “hello” from a spouse or sweetheart, or hearing the tiny voice of a child saying “Hi daddy,” or “Hi Mommy,” is enough to touch that tender place deep within the most hardened of warriors to bring tears to their eyes.

Why this massive Time Out? What is it for? What could be so important? Why do we travel across country to be home with our parents, family and loved ones now? Why do we come to church, when, for many of us, church is tucked away in an obscure filing cabinet under the label “My History” for most of the year? And yet, here we are. We can debate the why, but not the fact. What’s going on?

The answer is obvious, of course. It’s Christmas! We’re here to celebrate Christmas, to remember the birth of Jesus. Dah! Okay, but why? There are a lot of reasons. You’re with a girl friend. Your mom expects you to be here, and you give in, saying to yourself, “*For once a year, what the heck, it won’t kill me.*” (You should know that a lot of people die in church.) Or maybe we’re just curious. For many of us, it’s because we love a good story, and the story of Jesus’ birth is a great story. It is a love story, a mystery, and an

adventure all wrapped into one. For others of us, we are here because the story is about hope. A light breaks the darkness of the night sky and points to a crib in Bethlehem. So, when the world seems to be closing in on us, when our family is falling apart, we're out of work or illness is threatening, this is the kind of story that gets our attention. And then to learn that the child born is the Son of God, with shepherds being the first to hear of the good news, not the privileged and powerful but the marginalized, we realize that maybe God hasn't forgotten us after all. There is hope. We are not alone.

Most of us are here because we believe the story of Jesus, especially after he grew up, and it makes sense for our lives. It gives us meaning, and helps us understand why we are here on the earth in the first place. We realize that our stories are also love stories, and mysteries and adventures all wrapped into one, and, somehow, we realize that the Jesus Story intertwines with ours at every step of the way. It gives us a vision for life that changes everything. Even when we mess up, make bad decisions, fall into sin, we don't have to pretend everything is okay. We can admit our weaknesses and still maintain our dignity as human beings made to the image of God. Forgiveness is possible, and with forgiveness comes new beginnings.

So those are some of the reasons we are here. But if the birth of Jesus means that God has entered our world, we also have to ask, "*Why is God here?*" Why did God become one of us? Well, the word "Jesus" means savior, so we can say with confidence that Jesus came to save us. I'll buy that, but Pope Benedict XVI, in a recent encyclical on hope, *Spe Salvi*, challenges contemporary Christians who put too much emphasis on salvation. For some, to say, "*I'm saved!*" is to say it all, as if nothing else

matters. But Christ came to do more than to save us. Jesus came to show us a radically new way of being human.

The world of Jesus' day was violent. Its heroes were the powerful who oppressed and dominated others as their way of life. (Alexander the Great) The weak and the powerless were dispensable, especially if they were women or children. Humanity had become terribly inhumane. Jesus came to show us there was another way to be human, a way that would be in keeping with the dignity of every human being, regardless of social status. And it caught everyone off guard. Even John the Baptist, who had pointed to Jesus and said, "*Behold the Lamb of God!*" But from prison he would send two disciples to ask Jesus if he was the one who was to come or not. Jesus didn't act like the Messiah he had expected.

Rather than power and domination, Jesus' concern was what was happening between people. And so he connected personally with the people in his life. He loved and respected everyone he met, woman, child, sick, hurting, Pharisee, scribe or leper, rich, poor. His arms were open to welcome and embrace, not closed to exclude or rigid to stiff arm. He loved people no matter who they were, even the outcast. He wept tears of rejection because he still loved those who rejected him. Jesus became a victim who never played the role of a victim and never created another victim. That's radical! That's new! No one ever lived like that before!

Yet, it is apparently the way God intended us to live since we were made in the divine image. In fact, Jesus goes even further than that. He doesn't just model a new way of being human for us, he enters into our humanity and thus enables, empowers us to live that new way. That is the real gift of Christmas.

Father Richard Rohr tells of the time he was making a 30 day retreat at a Trappist monastery when, walking in the woods, he met a hermit coming his way. Seeing Richard and recognizing him, the hermit said, “*You speak to the world while I can speak to nobody. “Tell them that God is not out there, but in here!”* And then he walked on. God is not out there, but has entered into our lives. That is the wonder of Christmas.

We say we want peace on earth, and we sincerely mean it, but we continue to live the way people lived before Jesus came. After 2000 years, we are still about power and domination, still pitted one against the other. We’ll do anything to get ahead, even use steroids. Honestly, I don’t care why you are here today. That doesn’t really matter. But I do know God loves us all, and wants us to live in relationships of love with the people in our lives. That is what matters. And we can’t do it in isolation from our loving God. Peace on earth will come one heart at a time. And it’s time we took the message of Jesus seriously.