

## “Where is God In It?”

Sermon December 25, 2007 – Christmas Day

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I suppose that there is nothing more wondrous than the eyes and the words of a little child at Christmastime. I'll never forget our three-year-old son David's eyes and words when he pondered our Christmas tree and the manger scene beneath it, and stunned his parents with his question “where is God in it?”

“Where is God in it?” I remember an article in TIME magazine last year which raised a similar question: “We revere faith and scientific progress, we hunger for miracles and for MRI's. But are the world views compatible?”

The presidential candidate debates this year have given new attention to the subject, and every Christmas season inspires popular discussion of this question. Our Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, is a most thoughtful and articulate theologian, and his comments on this question are recently getting wide media attention.

And unless your only expectation is to re-invent the good feelings of the Christmas season every year, perhaps you've been prompted to consider more thoughtfully, “Where IS God, in all this?”

That question is not just one that comes from the eyes and mouth of a three-year-old—who turned 50 this year. In fact, I've never got that question out of my mind, and one way or another I don't think you have either.

Now when you think about God, it may be in terms of remoteness, a concept beyond the farthest limits of our vision and imagination. He is the high and lofty one that inhabits eternity.

Or perhaps you think of God sometimes in terms of otherness—you know, not only distant from us in space but also in every way from everything human. God is eternal: we are bound in time. We are limited and faulty in body, mind, and spirit: God is infinite, subject to no limitations, perfect in holiness, truth, and love.

And we think of God in terms of greatness—in terms of power beyond the most powerful nuclear explosion, of power to create the universe, to subdue all nations unto himself.

Yes, we think of God in terms like *remoteness*, *otherness*, and *greatness*—and then we come to Christmas. It's understandable that we ask, “Where does God fit in?” We hear the old familiar words of Luke about a simple manger scene under the Judean night sky, and it seems ridiculously incongruous with our sublime but fuzzy ideas of divinity.

What we read and hear, once again every time we come to church for Christmas services, is the story of a very ordinary event, about two very ordinary people, going to the county seat to pay their taxes because that's the only way to do it, unable to phone ahead for reservations, and winding up in a stable simply to have some place to sleep.

Then a baby is born, to be visited by some shepherds from the surrounding hills, full of strange stories about angels in the sky. But apart from those humble visitors the event takes place in quiet obscurity. *Almost nobody knows that it happens!* In fact, in all of the books and writings of the New Testament, it gets small space.

So it's no wonder that a child, or anybody, would ask, "Where does God fit in?" God was present, of course, as God is present at the birth of any new life, but it can seem difficult to believe that in this particular birth, the eternal, almighty God should be present in some special way.

Is there any *remoteness* of God here?—there's nothing remote about this Bethlehem stable, at a certain date and place in time. Is there any *otherness* of God here?—there's nothing unique about the birth of a baby. Do you see any *greatness* of God—in a tiny, squalling infant struggling to survive in such un-hospital-like surroundings?!

*We might even be forced to the conclusion that either God was not especially in Bethlehem at all, or else we come to Bethlehem really to learn what God is like!*

What do you think about that? The New Testament doesn't weigh those alternatives. It simply states the fact that gives it the character of newness. Decades after Jesus' birth old St. John would see how the good news about Jesus was slowly changing the world and he would write "no one has seen God...but the only Son, who is in the bosom of the father, *he has made him known!*" *This is the staggering, stupendous truth that grips our minds at Christmas with such freshness and power that each year we feel as if we're hearing it for the first time!*

For then the answer opens up—for the child or the theologian. This is God. This isn't some notion of supreme attributes, or earth-splitting explosions on Olympian heights...as safe and sane and comfortable as such explanations would be. **THIS** is God...with his eternal activity revealed in.....a stable!

*His "almightiness" is in his **Nearness**, in the ordinariness, the ugliness, the ambivalence and confusion and politics that takes a family to Bethlehem.*

Maybe we wish that it were different. Maybe we wish that the answer were a little more vague so we could build our own wish list of meanings around it. And we could stick with our concepts of God as "Life Force" or "Great Spirit" or "Transcendent Judge" or whatever.

**But suppose that the eternal truth behind the centuries-old drama of Christmas is true. He is not just the "man upstairs" as people sometimes say. Suppose that God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth, does come down to meet us right where we make**

**scientific discoveries, where we live and work and suffer and die! Suppose God is like that. Suppose that his almightiness consists of his lowliness.**

Then it means that God is not only above us; he is with us, beside us, bound up in the fabric, foibles and foolishness and new discoveries about life, and that young or old, priest or policeman, Polish or Polynesian—we all find God the same way: in the brokenness and basics of life.

In my first year of seminary the faculty had the bad judgment to send me out to Brooklyn College to interview students. One of the questions I could ask them was their understanding of the Incarnation. Well, here I was, a seasoned 24-year-old war veteran and a veteran of Episcopal Sunday Schools, and I didn't have the slightest idea what the "Incarnation" was!

Now as I ponder my own son's question, "Where is God in it?" I am profoundly convinced that in this baby in the manger we have learned how God reveals himself: his almightiness is in his lowliness, born among us.

**There's** the meaning of the "Incarnation": "*The word was made flesh, and dwells among us.*"

I hope all of the beautiful words and familiar Christmas melodies this morning won't obscure that tremendous fact. I pray that it will be possible for us to see the simple focus of all that we do as we come together to worship today. *For the Christ who was born in a stable and laid in a crib of straw now comes again to another Crèche.. this time a different kind of crib....in some small broken wafers and domestic California wine from a simple but decorated table..*

Now this Christmas morning or in fact ANY Sunday morning we don't have to travel very far to find him. But we do have to go; we do have to respond—taking our hopes and our dreams, our worries and hostilities, our connections with each other and our separations from each other, up to the altar with us, for the commonness of our life to be fed with common things—common bread and wine—which reveal as Bethlehem did, where God is—in community and communion.

That is worth singing about! This is worth rejoicing and celebrating! For the hopes and fears of all the years are met in him this Christmas Day and in all of world history since his birth. God and man have made a real contact, and we can proclaim the answer to the child's question, "where is GOD in it?" by singing, "Our King and Savior draws nigh **O Come—Let us adore Him!!**"

**Amen**