

**Eve of the Nativity
December 24, 2022
Grace St. Paul's**

“The first and great difference between primitive religious thought and the world religions...is that primitive peoples maintain a sense of mystery through their bond with nature; the world religions sever the relationship and attempt to establish a new, more comprehensible one.”

– Vine Deloria Jr. Amen.

A week ago last Sunday, while we were experiencing the power of Mary's Magnificat, the Financial Times broke a story that made headlines for a couple days, and then disappeared into the sunset, as our short attention span news cycle encourages. They reported that scientists at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory had done it. At 1:03 AM on December 5, for the first time in history, a fusion reaction was initiated that created more energy than it took to produce it.

Fusion, the process of merging atoms, is the reaction that the sun produces naturally and continually. It is how we get sunlight and warmth. It is what makes the stars shine. It is what powers the sun and the stars and makes life on our planet possible. For decades, fusion experiments have continually taken more energy to produce something than they generated. That is why the event from a couple

weeks ago was such a breakthrough. If the reaction that was achieved can be replicated on a large scale, and that is admittedly still a big if, it means that we could produce energy without radioactive waste. It means there would be no need to ever produce a greenhouse gas again. It holds the potential of saving our earth from the destruction it is presently undergoing as a result of our contaminated energy production. It would be clean, it would be cheap, and it would be as close to limitless as we can imagine. It is, in short, the holy grail of energy production.

Of course, moving from a laboratory setting into the real world is full of its own challenges. The idealists estimate that it will take a decade to come up with the methodology to do this on a large scale basis. Most however, believe it will take closer to three decades. But on December 5, that eventual possibility was born. Will it be soon enough to avert the most catastrophic aspects of the climate crisis? No one knows.

Of course it is a different birth that you came here tonight to celebrate. That birth took place 2027 years ago, give or take a year. When it occurred, it had even fewer days in the spotlight than the

fusion birth received. That would be zero. No one paid any attention to the birth of another brown baby to another teenage mother in a barn outside some God forsaken village in the Middle East. Save for some sheep and a few poverty stricken shepherds, no one knew or cared. Despite the lack of fanfare however, and what appeared to be the ho-hum nature of this birth, it, like the fusion birth, was an event that had never before occurred in history. And it would also lead to the holy grail, the actual one. We now call that phenomenon incarnation, a bodily manifestation of a divine being.

It was a religious notion that was just as preposterous then, as it is now. The world religions of the day were all polytheistic. And all of those hundreds of gods, whether they be Roman or Greek, Canaanite or Babylonian, Egyptian or Philistine, all existed in another plane of existence only. The objective of worship in the Empire where Jesus was born was to gain the blessing of these gods or at least to appease them, because they controlled your life from afar, and they could be quite random and temperamental in how they chose to do that. These gods visited the earth, but not to assist created beings, as the birth we celebrate tonight would, but rather to mess with it. Most often that

meant taking part in a carnal act with a human, and then immediately returning to god status. It was not incarnation, it was shape shifting.

That is what made tonight's religious event so bizarrely different.

There was only one God in first century Judaism and the story of tonight makes the absurd claim that this one God became a historically verifiable figure who came to earth to actually be a flesh and blood person. This divine being would be as vulnerable as any baby on this planet. This supernatural presence would then experience what it was like to be a finite individual, having the joys and the sufferings of any other being on a tiny planet in the Milky Way galaxy, one of the billions of such galaxies in the vast expanse of interstellar space, to quote one of our Eucharistic prayers. It would be a God who would experience the creation they themselves invented. In fact, this God would not just experience it, but be an actual part of that creation. This is the essence of the original Christmas story. The spark that created the universe, the entity responsible for the sun and the stars and this planet, the Eternal being that invented fusion, joined the world to experience that fusion. The Eternal One actually became

material, and was born to become one with this planet, just like you and me and thousands of other species.

This impossible story, our Christmas story, is what sets apart Christianity from the other faith traditions then and now. Our sister tradition, for example, Islam, teaches us about the Holy Other, the God is too unknowable to even comprehend. But tonight, we present to the world a God who is the Holy Us. We have the audacity to believe in a God who is so intimate that this being becomes part of the Eternal One's own creation. If the implications of the fusion birth this month are monumental, then this birth, if true, have to be beyond gargantuan, the most significant moment since the Big Bang. The fact that Jesus became flesh not only bonds the Eternal Essence of the universe to you and me and every human being before or since, but it also unites that Eternal presence with every creature on this planet. Incarnation unites God with the plants and the rocks and the rivers and the oceans. It brings God into an intimate relationship with the entire biological diversity of the planet. It means the cosmic dust that makes up the ant and the polar bear, the stars and the sun, are also a part of the divine presence. If Christmas is true, salvation can never

be about detaching ourselves from earth to get to a God in some other plane of existence. Incarnation, Christmas, has to mean that the entire earth is part of God's reality, God's body in fact. It too must warrant salvation. It is impossible to believe in the Christmas story without believing in the sanctity of the earth. Christmas means that we are intimately connected with all of creation and the creator at the same time. It means that the divine is part of the world we are destroying. It means that when we undo the web of creation, we are taking part in the most sacrilegious act possible.

Now let me ask you, is that what you learned about the meaning of Christmas? Has anyone ever suggested to you that the most important lesson in the Christmas story is that because God became incarnate, became part of the earth, we are called to embrace all of the natural world? Did any of you learn that the nativity scene with all of the animals is a symbol of the love we are supposed to have for all the creatures of the earth? Did you learn that the Word becoming flesh can only mean that we, like God, must be interconnected with the planet and protect it no matter what? But when you put this story

into historical context, I do not see how anyone could reach any other conclusion.

So what happened? How in the world did we go from Christmas teaching us that God became material, to us turning the material objects of the world into disposable items for us to consume as Christmas presents? I am confident that the early church never lost the real meaning of Christmas because early theologians talk about it. Take for example Irenaeus. In the second century, battling the first major heresy in the church, he uses the Christmas story to blow up the dualism in Gnosticism. Gnostics argued that only the spiritual world was good and all things material were inherently evil. Well, if that's the case Irenaeus argues, how is that Jesus became flesh, became part of the material world himself?

I would suggest that the church held on to the real meaning of Christmas until the third century. That is when the fledgling Christian community came to the land of the Celts and the Druids. Now you might think that this would be a good thing, because both of those cultures were already deeply connected to the land and its creatures. The Christmas story had to fit right in with their understanding. But

when Celts told the Christian missionaries that the tree in front of them was God, the missionaries were horrified. “God isn’t a tree. God is up there,” they professed. The religion that was different from all the other world religions, the religion that insisted that God was incarnated on Christmas day, the religion that taught the world about the intimacy of the divine with all of nature, threw it all out because of its fear of pantheism. They turned the God of immanence that Christmas teaches us into a God who was only transcendent, only a presence in another plane of existence, like all those other gods from the faith traditions that surrounded Judaism in the first century.

The truth is, there were virtually no similarities between the gods of Rome and Canaan and the God we experience in early Christianity. But with the Celts and the Druids? There is just a hair’s breadth of theological difference. Both teach of a divine presence that is material, that is part of the earth. Both stress God’s intimacy with all of creation. But the missionaries were blinded to the religious connections because they understood the Celts and Druids as backwards cultures. That is when we lost tonight. That is when the real Christmas disappeared. And that is when alienation between

humans and creation was reintroduced as part of our theology. I am certain the missionaries had no idea just how destructive that decision would be. Because of it, Christianity began teaching that this planet was only a stopping off point for us on our journey to God. And in so doing, the destruction of creation began in earnest.

Nothing had changed by the time a new crop of missionaries were sent to the New World in the 16th century and beyond. The religions of the indigenous people of North America, were seen as just as primitive as the Celts and Druids. To stamp them out, we continued to suppress the incarnational message of Christmas so that we could keep God up in the heavens.

If Judaism's great gift to the world is monotheism, then Christianity's gift to the world is Christmas, is incarnation. But not only did we take that gift away from everyone else, we also took it away from ourselves. In so doing, we have been in large part responsible for the climate crisis in which we find ourselves today.

If the true meaning of Christmas had stuck, if we had continued to show the world the intimate relationship between the divine and the natural world, if we had continued to celebrate Christmas as the feast

day when we embraced the entire planet because God was in it, just imagine the world we would be living in now. We would not desperately need human fusion, because we would have been living into God's fusion. We would not be wondering how to prevent the extinction of the animals of the planet because we would have been protecting them all along, knowing that they are a sacred part of God. We would not be dealing with the pollution of our air and water because we would have seen that pollution for what it is, a desecration of the divine.

Beloved, on this sacred night, the truth is so simple. Christmas can save us. All we need to do is bring it back. All we need to do is reintroduce incarnation to a broken world. All we need to do is see again the power of a divine baby born in the back of beyond.

So let us apologize to our indigenous sisters and brothers for not uniting with them centuries ago. And then let us celebrate, celebrate the real Christmas, celebrate the interconnectedness of our faith traditions with the entire cosmos, celebrate our intimacy with a God who is part of us, celebrate the religious fusion found in the Christmas experience, and the scientific fusion discovered in a lab a few weeks

ago. Let us celebrate that most impossible, unimaginable fantastical theological notion ever. And then let us give that gift to the entire world so that all creation will be free and healthy once again. That is a Christmas worth saving. That is a Christmas that will save all of us and all of God's interconnected creation. Amen.