

GOD WITH US
POST CHRISTIAN AND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCHES

December 27, 2009

John 1:14

“And the word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.”

I love the colorful little book, **Children’s Letters to God** that has been around for several years. (The letters were compiled in 1996 by Stuart Hample and Eric Marshall and illustrated by Tom Bloom.) These very honest expressions of faith and life always make me smile and remind me of the many unanswered questions and concerns I have about the Christian faith. In the last edition of **The Christian Century** (12/15/09), the editor, John Buchanan shared some of his favorite letters:

Dear God,

Are you invisible or is that just a trick? Lucy

Dear God,

Thank you for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy.

Joyce

Dear God, Maybe Cain and Abel would not kill each other if they had their own room. It works with my brother. Larry

The letter that seems most appropriate for this time of the year when we celebrate the gift of God's presence in our lives is this letter:

Dear God,

Are you real? Some people don't believe it. If you are, you'd better do something quick.

Love, Harriet Anne

Those are the relevant questions, right? The questions all of us in the community of believers find ourselves asking from time to time. "Are you real, God." "Where are you?" "Why is this happening to me?" "Won't you please do something quick?"

Every year at this time, I remember a conversation I once had with a Hospice patient a few days before Christmas. What I had hoped would be short, pleasant visit where I dropped by and wished this woman a Merry Christmas so that I would be free to continue my last-minute-shopping, turned into a lengthy soul-searching discussion of her faith. I had known this strong-willed, faithful and beautiful woman since I moved to Lubbock in 1987 and she had served as a mentor and friend to me as I was beginning my ministry and getting married.

So on that cold December day when she began to question the existence of God in her life as she experienced much physical

pain and great emotional and spiritual distress, I began to get very nervous. This classy and refined 81-year-old woman had been a leader in her church and the Lubbock community for many years; she had been a driving force in starting the South Plains Food Bank, The Sick Children's Clinic, and many other organizations that served the needs of those who found themselves on the margins of life. I had always looked up to her for guidance and understanding and so I was startled, when she grabbed my arm and said, "Elizabeth, is there really a God?"

I remember mumbling, "I sure hope so, Anita. I want to believe in God and I want to believe that God is real to us;"—this was probably not the most confident reassurance she was needing at the moment. But then, with tears in both of our eyes, we went on to a deeper discussion of her faith and her doubts. I wanted to reassure this woman who from my perspective, had always had life under great control, God at her beck and call and was usually the one doing the reassuring in the lives of other's. What I was eventually able to say to my older friend on that cold December day was that in both life and in death we belong to God and how the details are worked out is much more up to God than it is up to us. After a thoughtful pause, Anita shook her head, began to laugh and then profoundly confessed, "Well, Elizabeth, I guess if I were to be honest, it is likely that all these

years I've been telling God how it should be, and perhaps now, that he really has my attention in this sad state that I'm in, it is my turn to listen and to trust, to hope and to pray, to wait and to be open for the gift of God's presence again in my life, even now."

As I left this dear woman's home, I was shaken by the essential message of Christmas, which is "Emmanuel, God with us," and the questions it always raises for us, especially in times of crisis, "Who is this God and how is God really with us?" "Is God real? If so, God, you better do something quick!"

Times come in all of our lives when we feel alone, scared and out of control. People let us down. Close friends and family do not understand us. We become aware of our limitations. Life situations disappoint us. We get sick and are unable to do what has always been a normal routine. We experience the loss of work, family and friends. When the darkness of our circumstances threatens to snuff out the light within us, we wonder if God is real and we wonder how God can help us and give us strength, perspective and peace for the living of our days.

When we turn to our faith for help, we often naively expect crystal-clear answers to life's most haunting and difficult situations. My

14 year-old son was told last summer at church camp that God always answers our prayers, it's either "yes", "no", or "not at this time!" When I picked him up after camp and we began talking, even my teenager has lived long enough to verbalize that this was a lame and shallow attempt to explain the wonderful, mysterious, ways the Holy One relates with us in our everyday lives.

I guess I am a little surprised to find that as I get older I do not receive more answers to the deepest questions of life and faith. Instead, in my everyday encounters and relationships I am forced to live with more questions and to wrestle with painful situations beyond my control and expertise. On a good day this is okay because I have a deep peace about the fact that our Christian faith, my faith at least, is less and less about knowing and believing and being right, and more and more about loving and caring and being present with others in the highs and lows of this good and difficult life. I believe that real life-giving faith is about keeping our eyes and hearts wide open and doing things for others and for ourselves that bring more clearly into focus the gift of God's presence in our midst.

Browning Ware was the crusty, wise, outspoken, and compassionate pastor of the First Baptist Church in Austin for over 20 years. He wrote weekly columns in the Austin-

American Statesman and after his death from prostate cancer in 2002, his beloved daughter, Camille Ware Kress assembled some of his best columns into a book she entitled, **Diary Of A Modern Pilgrim**. In the preface she sets the stage for his work by sharing these insights from her father's journey:

“When I was younger,” Browning Ware says, “I thought there was an answer to every problem. And for a time I knew many of the answers. I knew about parenting until I had children. I knew about divorce until I got one. I knew about suicide until three of my closest friends took their lives in the same year. I knew about the death of a child until my son died. I’m not as impressed with answers as I once was. Answers seem so pallid, sucked dry of blood and void of life. Knowing answers seduces us into making grand pronouncements. I’m discovering that wisdom and adversity replace cocksure ignorance with thoughtful uncertainty. More important than the answer is the Answerer. ‘Thou art with me’—that’s what we crave.”

That is the message I believe we need most of all during this season. We make the celebration of Christmas so complicated. We load up the holiday season with activity that borders on

frenzy. We place more demands on ourselves and on others than at any other time of year. We hope and we yearn and we sometimes even demand that this season produce joy, happiness and peace. And the essence of it all is that God comes simply into the world and into your life and mine, not so much in response to the harried complexity of the celebration, but in simple love to respond to our most basic needs.

In a sermon entitled, “**Emmanuel**,” (from the book, *A Room Called Remember*, p. 65) the gifted and eloquent minister, Frederick Buechner has this to say about the hope of Christmas, “To look at the last great self-portraits of Rembrandt or to read Pascal or to hear Bach’s B-minor Mass is to know beyond the need for further evidence that if God has ever been anywhere, God is surely with them, as he is also with the man behind the meat counter, the woman who scrubs floors at Roosevelt Memorial, and the high-school math teacher who explains fractions to the bewildered child. And the step from ‘God with them’ to Emmanuel, “God with us,” may not be as great as it seems. What keeps the wild hope of Christmas alive year after year in a world notorious for dashing all hopes is the haunting dream that the child who was born that long ago day in Bethlehem may yet be born again even in you and me.”

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.”

God’s love is born in our hearts where we need to know that we are accepted and wanted and loved and valued and cherished whether we are deciding on what high school or college to attend, who to marry and share our most private selves with, what jobs to do that fill holes in our world and meet needs in our souls, or how to downsize our lives as our years dwindle and we wonder about the legacy of life and faith we have left behind. God’s love is born where our grief and losses and sufferings are deepest and most profound. God’s love is born where we are most vulnerable and anxious and least full of ourselves and our strivings. God’s love is born into our fears, anxieties, hurts, hopes, longings and dreams.

One of my favorite authors, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “It was God-With-Us. Not the God-Up-There somewhere who answers our prayers by lifting us out of our lives, but the God who comes to us in the midst of them---however far from home we are, however less than ideal our circumstances, however much or little our lives reflect the Christmas cards we send.

That is where God is born, just there, in any cradle we will offer to him, on any pile of straw we will pat together with our hands. Any of us who have prayed to be transported into God's presence this Christmas will get our wish---only not, perhaps, in the way we had thought. None of heaven's escalators are going up this season. Everybody up there is coming down, right here, right into our own Bethlehem, bringing us the God who has decided to make his home in our arms." (**Home By Another Way**; p. 24)

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth."

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving and Holy God,

We gather on this Sunday after Christmas with the hopes and fears of all the years in our hearts. As our families go home and we take the Christmas tree down, we are left to ponder the real meaning of Christmas in our lives. When all is going well for us and we feel that we have the world by the tail, it is often much easier to have faith and believe. But when we have problems in our health and work and relationships and families, then we feel quite vulnerable and alone and wonder more deeply about the presence of God with us and the power of God in us.

Give us this Christmas, the eyes and ears and hearts of young children who give themselves over to the magic and the excitement and who remind us tired, worn-out and cynical adults of the new life that comes to us in our pain, boredom, failures, and broken places and waits to give us healing, courage, and much new life if we are willing to give up our need to control and tell God how it needs to be. As we listen to the Christmas story again this year in words and songs, remind us that the people God chose and the events that unfolded were for

the most part out of everyone's control and realm of predictability and imagination.

During this Christmas season may we prepare an empty manger in the midst of our hurts, failures, and vulnerabilities in which You, Lord can continue to be born. May we be more fully aware of the love that comes to us as a gift and may we be willing to let our lifestyles and our choices reflect the love of God incarnated in Jesus. We ask that our loved ones and friends who are sick, grieving, distressed and not up to par this Christmas understand more fully that the emptier our hands and the poorer our quarters, the more clearly we perceive that our hearts were meant to be Christ's home here on earth. In the days ahead, help us O god to hear once again the singing of angels, the baby's cry and your eternal, life-giving words to us, as we pray together, Our Father who art in heaven...AMEN.