

GOD IS WITH US

Even when he doesn't seem to be

Greg Albrecht

She had never been with a man — not even the man she was going to marry. As a bride-to-be, the teenage girl named Mary lived each day making plans, dreaming of the future and looking forward to her marriage. Everything was “normal” and her future seemed promising until an angel of the Lord appeared to her saying she was “highly favored” (Luke 1:28).

Just as Mary was mulling over what on earth “highly favored” meant the angel further explained, “You are to conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus” (Luke 1:31). Having a child before she was married was not high on the list of things to which Mary aspired — giving birth to a child before marriage whose father was anyone other than Joseph, her fiancé, would be a disaster!

When Mary reminded the angel she was a virgin, the angel told her “the Holy Spirit will come

on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35).

Mary’s mind was racing. As a young Jewish girl, she had heard stories about angels appearing to patriarchs and Old Testament prophets, but none of her family or friends had ever had a conversation with an angel. The fact that an angel had appeared to her and talked with her was troubling enough, but the details of his announcement had to blow Mary out of the water! We can safely assume she didn’t run out and celebrate this news by having cake and ice cream with Joseph and her family.

She quickly processed this completely unexpected out-of-the-blue announcement — what would her family say when she started “showing”? What would her husband-to-be say and think? What would her friends and neighbors say about her on

the first century equivalent of social media? As far as Mary was concerned, this was the end of her life before it really got started!



The Annunciation to the Virgin Mary
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All she wanted was to get married, *then* have children and raise them with Joseph. Needless to say, this news turned her world upside down. God was reversing the traditional values Mary had been taught. *First* she would become pregnant, *then* she would get married. Really?

As she was “greatly troubled” (Luke 1:29) the assuring words of the angel calmed Mary’s emotions — **“For nothing is impossible with God”** (Luke 1:37, NKJV). Perhaps the presence of God rested in and with her in such a way that in the midst of her turmoil, God’s grace enabled this teenage girl to respond:

“I am the Lord’s servant,”
Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled” (Luke 1:38).

GOD WITH US, EVEN DURING COVID

When the news of COVID-19 was first announced to us, we were all “greatly troubled,” like Mary was when her world was turned upside down. As each day and week went by the news became more confusing and stressful. Nothing like this had ever happened to anyone we knew. The world in which we had once lived did not “stay safe at home” or practice “social distancing.” We were used to shopping in grocery stores expecting shelves filled with toilet paper, among other things. We have been “carrying” the reality of this pandemic for about nine months, haven’t we?

The announcement of COVID-19 did not come from an

angel, but it turned our world upside down, didn’t it? We had heard of historical pandemics but we had never lived through one.

Looking back over the last nine months of this pandemic, governments and authorities are assessing whether they did enough, or whether they reacted quickly enough — it is not easy to face a power over which we have no control. It is tempting to adopt a similar judgment to our own lives as Christ-followers.

Did we wear our masks every time and place when we were told we must? Did we sanitize surfaces of furniture and devices with hand-wipe disinfectants as much as we should have? Did we wear gloves as prescribed? Were we greedy and did we hoard toilet paper and paper towels?

At the end of this “lost year,” as some are now calling 2020, we celebrate the birth of Jesus and we celebrate **“For nothing is impossible with God”** (Luke 1:37, NKJV). He did for us what we can never do for ourselves.

PERFORMANCE-BASED RELIGION CAN CO-OPT CHRISTMAS

Within Christendom at large the celebration of the birth of Jesus, who does the impossible in and for and with us — doing for us what we can never do for ourselves — has become an orgy of spending and *doing*. Christmas experiences are often determined to be a success or failure on the basis of *how much is done*, how much money is spent, how many Christmas cards sent and

received — all of this *doing* can fog over and even obliterate the central focus. It’s about Jesus, not about us!

Many people experience Christmas as an annual test — the test is to make sure to spend enough money to buy friendship and love, for at least another year. Many feel compelled to send a card to people on their list, so that those people know they are loved. The idea of Christmas as it is observed by so many is all about an incredibly busy and stressful time, shopping, spending yourself into oblivion, often getting sick and hoping that somehow, some way, when Christmas finally comes you have *done enough*.

Isn’t that a definition and a microcosm of performance-based Christ-less religion? Christ-less religion is all about slaving away, working harder, doing more, giving more, being stressed and worried, hoping against hope that when all is said and done, God will be pleased enough so that he will let us into his kingdom of heaven.

While the actual emphasis and significance of Christmas is on what God in the person of Jesus does for us, the entire celebration can be co-opted by Christ-less, legalistic and oppressive religion so that it becomes one huge ordeal wherein people engage in an exasperating attempt to find some way to make family and friends and God happy with them.

Instead of Christmas being about what Jesus gives to us, it

can be twisted and corrupted into what we must give to others – and to God – so that he and others will be pleased enough by our performance to love us. Instead of Christmas being about the love of God that is freely given to one and all, Christ-less religion twists and perverts it into a nightmare where we have to prove our love to family and friends and God.

GOD IS WITH US EVEN IF HE DOESN'T SEEM TO BE

Most of us immediately reacted to the terrifying pandemic news,

furiously “doing” all we could to prepare and protect ourselves and our loved ones. We purchased face masks and gloves and we stood in line for toilet paper and disinfectant wipes.


When we humans are faced with a threat, we hunker down and look for cover. It’s the normal and expected reaction, and there is certainly nothing wrong with self-preservation.

There were times over this last nine months, when the world seemed to be drastically changing, when so many were confused and worried, many wondered why God was silent –

was he powerless in the face of this pandemic – and if God by definition can do whatever he wants to, then why didn’t he do something?

When she heard that her world was about to be forever turned upside down, Mary searched for a firm foundation – for a precedent – for direction. Perhaps she thought of the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (Daniel 3). You remember the story, don’t you?

The story is set in the kingdom of Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar had constructed an idol of gold that



“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” —Luke 1:38

measured ninety feet high by nine feet wide. Perhaps he thought this idol would be a way of solidifying his own power by centralizing religious worship and placing it under his authority.

He directed, following the dedication of this idol, that this announcement be made by his herald: *“Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do:*

As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace” (Daniel 3:4-6).

This ultimatum was a grievous dilemma for all Jews who believed, as per the ten commandments, in worshipping only one God (Exodus 20:3) and therefore absolutely refused to *“bow down ... or worship ... an image in the form of anything ...”* (Exodus 20:4).

When some who hated the Jews in general, and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (who were appointed as administrators in Nebuchadnezzar’s government structure)

specifically, reported that these three men would not bow down and worship the idol, Nebuchadnezzar was *“furious with rage”* (Daniel 3:13). When Nebuchadnezzar demanded to know if it was true – were they refusing to follow his order? –

“Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, ‘King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up” (Daniel 3:16-18).

There Mary was, dreaming of her upcoming marriage and a life lived “happily ever after,” when she received a message that her life and expectations would be thrown into a blazing

furnace. There we were at the beginning of 2020, living life in an expected and “normal” way, when out of nowhere came the reality that life would not be the same as it had been. ***We were faced with a blazing furnace.***

God may not always answer our prayers in the way we want. God may not always “behave” in a manner consistent with our expectations. We may not know if God will deliver us from the fiery furnace, but our faith is that we will follow Jesus Christ ***even if he does not deliver us.***

The gospel of Jesus Christ sets us free from the fears and worries of the fiery furnaces of life, even if we do not survive them. The gospel of Jesus Christ assures us that Jesus is the fourth man walking around in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3:24-25). Jesus is with us in the fire regardless of how hot the fire is and whether we think he is doing all that he should be doing.

Jesus is with us not because we do all the right things to protect, secure and immunize our lives,

but he is there because he is who he is. Jesus came because we cannot rescue ourselves from the dilemmas and pitfalls that face us in our lives.

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened by a yoke of slavery.” —Galatians 5:1

GOD WITH US

Christmas is about a baby, a really vulnerable baby, born into poverty, into a land that is militarily occupied, to a race of people who are horribly oppressed. God in the flesh – even though it didn’t seem like God is with us.

Christmas is about a baby whose life is threatened soon after his birth so that his family has to run to save his life – they have to become aliens and immigrants. That doesn’t seem like God with us, does it?

Wait – What about beautiful Christmas trees and expensive presents and lavish meals and feasts and huge choral concerts? Nothing at all in the Gospels about Joseph and Mary being so busy, buying presents, attending all kinds of church activities, baking cookies, having parties, going to concerts – none of that! Didn’t Joseph and Mary

get the memo – didn't they know what Christmas is all about?

When we perceive Christmas as God being with us even when he doesn't seem to be, we will focus our hearts and our souls on serving others in the name of Jesus, on picking up our cross and following Jesus and on losing our desires in the service of helping to fulfill the needs of others. The question is not what one will "get" for Christmas but what one may, by the grace of God, give to others – and even more so, what that little baby's birth gave us.

So wait just a minute – Christmas is really all about the love of God incarnated in a helpless baby who was hated from the get-go, a baby who would eventually be so despised he would be viciously crucified, even though all he did was to care, comfort, heal and help any and all.

So wait just a minute – Christmas is not about Jesus who comes and smacks down all our enemies. It's about Jesus who comes and gets smacked down by...well, let's see, by religion, wasn't it?

So wait just a minute – Christmas is about God

being with us even though he doesn't seem to be. Christmas is about God being who he is, in Jesus, not who we want him to be. Celebrating the birth of Jesus is not all about being desperately busy and stressed, decorating, sending cards, going places, hoping our family won't get upset with us, hoping someone in our family will come and visit us...

Because if that's what Christmas is all about, and if all of that is the true significance of Christmas, then Christmas is just one annual big disappointment because humans will always let us down. For that matter, we will always let others down because, in the end, if we are to be measured by how hard we work, how much money we spend, how much we do, it will never be enough, will it?

Christmas is about God rescuing us. It's about God doing for us what we can never do. It's about Jesus, God in the flesh, being with us, for us, and in us, even if he doesn't seem to be. □

Greg Albrecht is president and pastor of Plain Truth Ministries." □

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