

**WHAT  
CHRISTMAS  
Is  
ALL  
ABOUT**



*by Greg Albrecht*

# Introduction

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It truly is the most wonderful time of the year! But what is Christmas really all about?

Everyone remembers Christmas—even if it's only a date on the December calendar.

Christmas marks the time of our lives. No matter what our culture and traditions may have dictated that we do or not do—no matter what our family practices may have been—Christmas is a time that we remember.

But what is the real significance of Christmas?

This booklet represents a compilation of *Plain Truth* articles I have written in the past, and since edited and updated.

May they help you to understand what Christmas is all about, and to experience the divine Gift you have been given.

Merry Christmas!



Greg Albrecht  
President, Plain Truth Ministries  
Christmas, 2007

## Four Chaplains, One Savior

*“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4).*

On December 3, 1943, a German U-boat torpedoed and sank the U.S.S. *Dorchester* with over 1,000 American troops on board. Army chaplains George Fox, Clark Poling, John Washington and Alexander Goode went to lifeboat stations and issued life jackets to the servicemen. In a grim parallel of the *Titanic*’s inadequate supply of lifeboats, the *Dorchester* did not have enough life jackets for its passengers and crew. As the *Dorchester* began to slip beneath the icy waters of the North Atlantic, survivors recall seeing four chaplains slipping off their life jackets and giving them to fellow soldiers.

In December, we celebrate God becoming one of us that he might save us. God, in the person of Jesus, took on human flesh in an event we refer to as the Incarnation. He was “God with us,” subject to all that we fear and encounter, in order to save us.

Paul tells us in Philippians to humble ourselves and consider the needs of others while laying aside selfish ambition and vain conceit. The passage in which these verses appear describes the “enfleshment” of God and the mind of Jesus. He voluntarily laid aside entitlements of divinity (while remaining God) to become one of us, to save us from the icy waters of our sins.

The blockbuster movie, *Titanic*, vividly portrayed the upper-deck lives of the rich and famous. Greed, manipulation and “me-first” attitudes were the order of the day, with little concern shown for passengers of lower classes who shared the same voyage. When the inevitable happened, it was still “me-first,” with few heroic and sacrificial examples depicted.

We should be cautioned not to become spiritually intoxicated by the prosperity of our culture. The month of December is a special challenge as we struggle with consumerism and materialism that threaten to overwhelm the meaning of the season. In our haste to buy and consume, we should remember our Savior did not come to a palace but to a stable. He was born to the working class in a land occupied by a foreign power. He was a prince, but willingly accepted the life of a pauper. Paul tells us Jesus “*made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant*” (Philippians 2:7). Our Savior reflected, “*How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God*” (Luke 18:24).

Take time to remember the poverty that Jesus voluntarily accepted, the humanity he bore so he might be one of us. December 3, 2008 will mark the 65th anniversary of the selfless sacrifice of four chaplains who stood on the deck of the *Dorchester* having voluntarily surrendered their own life jackets, linked arm in arm with heads bowed in prayer. All around, troops scrambled for safety as the ship slipped into its watery grave.

The four *Dorchester* chaplains—one Methodist, one Jewish rabbi, one pastor in the Reformed Church, one Catholic priest—united by Christ in sacrificial love and servanthood. “*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life*” (John 3:16).

O come let us adore him. Let us remember the mind of Jesus. Let us set aside the self-centered “me-first” spirit of our age. Let us worship God who is still with us. (*Adapted—originally published November, 1997*).

## Peace on Earth

*“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests”*

(Luke 2:14)

The night seemed normal—nothing out of the ordinary. The shepherds were watching the sheep, just like they always did. But suddenly something abnormal happened—an angel appeared. The shepherds were terrified. After assuring the shepherds they had nothing to fear, the angel announced the coming of the Prince of Peace.

Then God composed and arranged a musical anthem performed by a heavenly choir to emphasize the importance of the angel’s message. The Bible uses a military term, *host*, to describe the angelic choir (Luke 2:13). An army came to announce peace. What kind of peace?

- The peace of God is the glory of God. These lyrics, put to music by many composers, have often been called “Gloria.” Real peace must first acknowledge and praise God, realizing that true peace flows from his goodness and mercy.

- The peace of God is the product of the coming of Immanuel—“God with us” (Matthew 1:23). Peace breaks out when God is with us.

- The peace of God comes because of the presence of God on the earth. Peace is heaven on earth.

- The peace of God is given to those “on whom his favor rests.” Peace on earth proceeds from God and becomes a reality for those who are blessed by his favor, and on whom his grace is given.

When we humans think of peace, we usually think of the absence of something. If only peo-

ple wouldn’t hate each other. If only we didn’t have any weapons of war. If only poverty could be abolished. If only we could win the war against disease. If only justice could prevail.

But if all our “if only” prayers were answered, the peace of God would not be the result. The peace of God is not simply the absence of adversity and war. The sovereign God chose to become one of us at a time in history when external peace (the Pax Romana) prevailed throughout most of the civilized world.

God came to us, in the person of Jesus, at a time when massive armed conflict was not a factor. He brought peace to the world, not by taking away or removing problems, but by adding his presence to the world. Immanuel—God with us.

The peace of God is the presence of God. The peace Jesus brought, and the peace he still brings, is his presence, not his absence.

Christmas is much more than a time when we all try to be happy, nice, merry and peaceful. It’s much more than trying to have a peaceful dinner with extended family and relatives with whom you normally don’t get along. It’s much more than trying not to have bad things happen for a little while. Christmas reminds us that the peace of God comes to us only by his presence.

*“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”*

The peace of God proceeds from God, not from men. God brings it, and he gives it to those upon whom he gives the greatest gift. We cannot generate the peace of God, but we can receive it.

*“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid”* (John 14:27). The peace of God is not the realization of all of our “if onlys.” The peace of God is the presence of God. Immanuel—God with us—is with us and has come to find us and save us. Come into his presence, into the glory of God.

O come let us adore the Prince of Peace.  
*(Adapted—originally published November, 1998).*

## The Real Beginning

It's here! The end of another year. And once again it has been a predictable year. Lots of doubt and despair. The grumps, the gloom and doom prognosticators, the fear mongers and the Jeremiad prophecy buffs have been relentlessly selling their wares.

The gospel (a word that means “good news”) is often reinterpreted and repackaged as bad news. Christians find themselves assaulted and insulted by a message that is anything but good news.

Threats and intimidation reign down from pulpits as religious leaders attempt to link natural catastrophes, war and mayhem with God's wrath and displeasure.

Thankfully, the vast majority of the party poopers who masquerade as having been given the fruit of the Holy Spirit (check their attributes with those listed in Galatians 5:22-23) agree on one thing—only Jesus Christ can clean up this mess!

It does take Jesus, doesn't it? As we end another year, it might be helpful to recall the understated way the good news first came into our world.

Jesus' birth passed with little fanfare. Books about his first coming did not dominate the Christian best-seller lists. The vast majority of humanity had no idea that God had entered time and space.

God has a way of bringing good news into our corrupted world, renewal in the midst of evil and transformation when it seems like all is lost. I have always been fond of the way cartoonist H.T. Webster celebrated the 100th anniversary of

the birth of Abraham Lincoln. In 1909, Webster depicted this anniversary by re-creating events surrounding Lincoln's birth.

The two central figures of his graphic commentary were two Kentucky woodsmen meeting on a snow-covered wilderness path. It was a time long before CNN, cell phones, e-mail and satellite communications. The two woodsmen met on the trail and exchanged news of the swearing in of the new American president, James Madison. They debated about how much of Europe would eventually be conquered by a man named Napoleon Bonaparte.

Finally, after covering global and national news, they discussed what was happening locally. One of the men mentioned that a baby had been born at Tom Lincoln's house. With that, they ended their conversation and went their separate ways, agreeing that nothing of any consequence happened in their corner of the world.

Ever noticed how God starts with things that are of little consequence to humans? He simply started out as a slightly wrinkled, brand new baby—part of what it means to be “despised and rejected by men” (Isaiah 53:3).

Joseph and Mary, expecting her first baby, had just arrived in Bethlehem, and they had no place to stay. They were strangers in town, and they finally settled for an animal shelter. It was there that the King of kings and Lord of lords entered our world. He came to be one of us in order to save us.

There wasn't much good news in Bethlehem at that time. Taxation was high, the land was occupied by the Romans and times were tough. But God chose this exact time in human history to be born as a baby so he might bring us good news.

Christmas is an annual reminder that God has once and for all leveled the playing field by inviting us to wonder and consider his glory and his grace.

Let's put our pursuits and interests aside and ponder God's amazing grace. (*Adapted—originally published November, 1999*).

## The Servant King

Christianity has often been described as a life of service to others. Serving others sounds noble and altruistic. It's one way we would all like to describe ourselves to others. Christians, by definition, are called to serve. But have you ever read the fine print of your "service contract"?

A closer examination of the fine print of Christianity can help us know if we are authentic servants, following in Jesus' footsteps. One of the acid "tests" of Christianity goes something like this: *You will be able to judge how deeply committed you really are to serving others by your reaction when others treat you like the servant you claim to be.*

Living a life of service usually means we "don't get no respect" (apologies to Rodney Dangerfield, Noah Webster and my 5th-grade English teacher). Remember the time when ten of Jesus' twelve disciples were indignant? The mother of two of their fellow disciples had shamelessly asked Jesus to give the top positions in his kingdom to her sons.

The other disciples did not simply shrug off the favor she asked as the prejudicial request of a mother who felt that nothing was good enough for her two sons. The ten were angry—not because the woman had asked for such positions, but because they felt they were being overlooked. They were not getting any respect, they were being treated like, well, servants!

Jesus came to serve, not to be served. That's why he wasn't born in a castle, even though he was the Prince of peace. That's why God in the flesh started his life in the barnyard with animals. He came to serve—that's why he washed his disciples' feet. He came to serve—that helps

us understand why the King of kings would willingly allow himself to suffer and die on the cross.

God is not like us. The King of kings is not like other kings. God does not need to be fawned over. He doesn't need for us to show him respect and deference. We humans, however, have high hopes that others will think well of us—that when we die a big crowd will "pay their respects" by coming to our funeral. Not exactly how Jesus ended his earthly life, is it? Not exactly.

It seems we may never fully grasp, on this side of eternity, the wonder and meaning of the birth of God the Son. How was he fully human and fully divine? Why did he do it? Did he know how we humans would take advantage of someone who lives simply to serve others? Was he worried he would end his life without being respected?

We know how Jesus reacted to being treated like a servant. He was not surprised, for the reason he became a human was to be our servant. He was not offended when he was slighted, put down, ignored or not given respect. He expected such reactions. Isaiah calls him the suffering servant. Jesus knew that suffering was part of being a servant.

When God calls us to be Christians and to follow Christ, he calls us to follow him. Serving others does not usually include being honored with human awards, recognition and respect. No award dinners were ever held for Jesus in recognition of his life of service—just a crucifixion.

Christians are not called to lives of service that will be recognized and honored in this life. There are no Oscars at an Academy-Award-like ceremony for those who live a life of service.

Serving others is what Christians do because Christ lives his life in us, enabling us, despite our natural desire for others to serve us. This year, as you view nativity scenes, think about Jesus' life of service—a simple, unadorned life. One still night, without pageantry or acclaim, Jesus moved into the neighborhood we live in. He lived life just like we do, experiencing the same heartaches and pains, because he came to serve, not to be served. *(Adapted—originally published November, 2000).*

## Great Exchanges

Your first thought at this time of the year might be those frenzied crowds in shopping malls and department stores on the days immediately following Christmas. People exchanging and returning gifts they received that were the wrong size, wrong color—or just plain wrong!

But there's another exchange we need to keep in mind. This great exchange is the reality of the cross of Christ. Jesus Christ took our sin and died for it, paying the debt that we could not pay. In exchange, God, because of his grace, gives us eternal life. Our sin for eternal life! The great spiritual exchange.

Great exchanges characterize the month of December for Christians—as gifts, greeting cards, worship, meals and social visits are exchanged and experienced in celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. And while the cross was a great exchange, so was the manger in Bethlehem.

The miracle, mystery and majesty of Christmas is found in Immanuel—God with us (Matthew 1:23). God with us means that God is not distant, detached or disconnected. He didn't consider himself immune from our suffering and pain. God, in the person of Jesus, came to be one of us that he might save us. The Creator of the cosmos became a creature of his creation in order to set right all that has gone wrong on our tiny little planet.

Not only did God, in the person of Jesus, come to be one of us, he did so in a way that we would never have imagined or planned, had he asked our advice. He didn't arrive from the glory of eternity and heaven as a full grown adult.

Even though the Bible calls him the second Adam, the King of kings started his earthly journey by being born as a baby. And not just any baby—but born to a virgin. And not just any place, but a barnyard, as opposed to a palace more befitting the King of kings. The circumstances of his entrance on the world stage included a working class family, a young mother (a teenager who was unmarried when she conceived), an enslaved nation under military occupation and a small, out of the way place called Bethlehem.

In the play *Green Pastures*, the angel Gabriel is depicted as approaching God while God is deep in thought. God is concerned that the people on earth do not seem to be listening to the prophets and messengers he sends. Gabriel becomes angry and offers to blow the final trumpet at once, ending human history as we know it. But God takes the trumpet away from Gabriel. Gabriel protests that humans never listen to the messengers God sends. God responds, "I am not going to send anybody this time. I am going myself." It was a great exchange.

Christmas is designed to worship, celebrate and proclaim this great event—this great exchange. Christmas is a time that should be Christ-centered. You may choose to put up lights, hang stockings, decorate a tree, wear red and green, send Christmas cards, attend a concert, have a party, spend time with your family and observe special family traditions. But all of those events are simply icing on the cake. The reason and the foundation of Christmas is Christ.

Don't forget what Christmas is all about. Frosty the Snowman, Santa Claus, shopping expeditions, wrapping presents, yule logs and sleigh rides can easily take our focus off the sacred and direct it to the secular. Christmas is all about God doing for us what we can never do for ourselves. Christmas is all about God's love for us. Don't get so caught up in physically oriented exchanges that you miss the great spiritual exchange. (*Adapted—originally published November, 2001*).

## Not From the Gospel

Does the gospel of Jesus Christ occupy the center stage of your life? Because of the cross of Christ, God gives us salvation by his grace, not by any merit or good deed we perform. That's it—the simple yet profound good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. But what really preoccupies Christians today?

Examine the subjects of best-selling books in Christian bookstores. Consider the hype about being left behind. The cross and empty tomb of Jesus are evidence that we will never be left behind. We have already been rescued and saved—why the concern about being left behind? Where did we get that idea? *Not from the gospel.*

What about prayer? Does God really require us to say a particular prayer before he will “enlarge our boundaries?” Does the gospel tell us that our prayers need to be like a magic formula, that obligates God, like a genie in a bottle, to grant our every wish? Is the prayer of an obscure Old Testament person “the key to a life of extraordinary favor with God” (*The Prayer of Jabez*, pg. 7)? Where did this idea come from? *Not from the gospel.*

A few years ago, preparing for Y2K was the craze: Buy some land in the country, freeze-dried food, some guns (just to kill animals with of course) and take your family to flee from the wrath to come. Where did we get that idea? *Not from the gospel.*

Now there's another new idea about prayer—prayers are not effective because we are not yelling at God. It seems those who believe in “prayer-yelling” assume that God is in heaven, and heaven is a long distance from here, and that obviously requires shouting and screaming. Of course, others are praying at the same time,

and the more you can do to make yourself heard, the better. And where do those ideas come from? *Not from the gospel.*

And there is the ever popular “I'm better than you are” games that Christians fall for. My church is better than yours, which in turn makes me better than you, because I have “more truth” or even “new truth.” Those who discover “new truth” often claim to have a revelation, and thus they “restore” truth that has been “lost.” The problem with that is that the gospel of Jesus Christ has been freely available for 2,000 years (Galatians 1:6-9; Jude 3). *When it comes to the gospel—if it's new, it's not true.* “New truths”—where do they come from? *Not from the gospel.*

*What does all this have to do with the birth of Jesus?* I'm glad you asked. Not much. In fact, some versions of religious sensationalism, exaggerated truth claims, and posturing and majoring in minors take some folks so far away from the gospel that they don't even bother celebrating the birth of Jesus—in December or any time of the year. Some religions take some so far away from Christianity that the cross is never spoken of—an aversion to even mentioning the word “cross” being a tell-tale sign of cultic teaching.

The gospel offers us precious riches of God's grace, yet we are so easily seduced into exchanging the priceless jewels of authentic Christianity for the cheap trinkets of religion. Religion tells us that its rituals are just as important as Jesus. Religion tells us that salvation is based upon our performance. Religion dangles esoteric, exotic notions in front of us, tantalizing us with the idea that very few have the opportunity to have the knowledge we have. (And, if you order today, you'll get those free steak knives that cut through steel!)

It's Christmas time—when the whole world is encouraged to remember that Jesus changed the world, and that he occupies the center stage of the gospel. How close are you to the cradle, cross and empty tomb? (*Adapted—originally published November, 2002.*)



## Just Another Party?

Many contemporary Christmas celebrations and traditions have strayed far from the reason for the season. Jesus is often left out in the cold as many observe one of two opposing celebrations that appropriate his name: 1) a secular Christmas, or 2) a religious Christmas. *A secular Christmas is usually all about eating, drinking, spending and consuming to excess. It's just another excuse for a party. A religious Christmas is all about doing the right things at the right times in the right places with the right people.*

Authentic Christianity offers a third option, one that is neither secular nor religious. The focus of a Christ-centered Christmas is the One whose birthday we celebrate. There is no real Christmas without Christ—he is what Christmas is all about—the party is in his honor.

Christmas is a forceful reminder that our world is not yet God's kingdom. The Incarnation, the coming of God in the flesh to be one of us, is the fundamental miracle of all Christianity—the birthplace of all our worship. The coming of Jesus signals a reversal of values for our world.

Christmas reminds us that Jesus comes into our world where 19-year-old pro athletes may earn more in one year than the teachers who once taught them in school will earn in a lifetime of teaching. He comes into our world where executives vote themselves multi-million dollar “Christmas” bonuses while the rank and file worker receives a pittance. Jesus comes into our world and values none of these things.

He comes into our world where military and big business steamroll over the lost, the impover-

ished, the vulnerable and the victimized. He comes into our world and values all of these, “the least of these brothers of mine...” (Matthew 25:40).

Jesus comes into our world that is obsessed with *self*. And both the secular and the religious Christmas are all about *us*. Both celebrations fail to honor Jesus because the focus is on *us*—who we are, the deeds we perform, the traditions we observe, what we are given and what we feel entitled to receive. They draw attention to *our* goodness and appeal to *our* egos and lusts.

Authentic, Christ-centered values have been perverted by Christ-less religion. It's as if someone slipped into the department store of life during the night and changed all the price tags. The things of real value are priced as insignificant while the cheap and tawdry carry expensive price tags.

Jesus instructed that our feasts should include those who cannot repay our generosity (Luke 14:12-14) so that we may be reminded of our own position as recipients of God's grace. *A secular Christmas without Jesus is a counterfeit Christmas, a Christmas in name only. A religious Christmas without Jesus is often an attempt to do the right things so that God will be obligated to repay us. “Santa Claus is coming to town—he knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake.”*

Jesus was born in a barnyard because there was no room in the inn (Luke 2:7). Jesus, who voluntarily gave himself, becoming “poor that we might be rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9) is the guest of honor at many Christmas celebrations in name only, because he is on the outside looking in.

Christmas is not about what we can get from God after we have been good, but it is about the fact that everything we have and all that we are, all of our physical and spiritual benefits come by God's grace, in spite of who we are and what we do. He gives us the greatest gift because he is good. That's what a Christ-centered Christmas is all about. (*Adapted—originally published November, 2004.*)

## The Impossible Dream

*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).*

Christmas can be impossible! Greeting cards and catalogs portray Christmas celebrations in idyllic small towns buried in snow, with prosperous, healthy people strolling through a winter wonderland without a care in the world. This picture of a Disneyland-like Christmas is completed by scenes of model families gathering around roaring fireplaces, feasting at dining tables laden with mouth-watering foods and opening mountains of beautifully wrapped presents scattered under sparkling Christmas trees.

This mythical Christmas is a place where there is no last minute shopping, no fights for parking places, no stress, no lack of money, no illness—nor any harsh words. Cheerful and happy words festoon Christmas cards—words like cheer, love, warmth, love and happiness. Our expectations of a perfect Christmas are raised to the unreachable stars as we see illustrations of unruffled, serene and well dressed people showing us how to have a happy Christmas. All is calm in la-la land.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch (the world that the alien artists who depict such scenes must never visit) real, live people are frantically trying to create a peace-on-earth good-will-to-men picture postcard Christmas in their own homes and families.

But it never really happens, does it? Someone gets sick. Christmas cards arrive late. Fuses blow when the lights and decorations outside the house are turned on. Someone in the family blows their

fuse at another family member and glares at them across the Christmas table. Little children pick this special time to throw some of their biggest temper tantrums of the year, while some adults choose this time to behave as spoiled children.

December 26th finally arrives, with the memory of another flawed and imperfect Christmas once again reminding us that our efforts to produce peace, love, warmth, happiness and perfect families just aren't good enough—no matter how much money we throw at this impossible dream.

How was it at the beginning? Did Joseph and Mary arrive at the Bethlehem Four Seasons in their Range Rover, packed with presents from Neiman Marcus? The real story is that an angel appeared to a teenage girl who then became pregnant (before she was married) without having sex. The young, very pregnant teenager then endured an arduous journey on horseback to Bethlehem with Joseph, spent the night in a barn, and gave birth to her baby who was the Savior of the world.

The Christmas story reveals how unlike us God really is. *If any human had written the script for the first Christmas it would have been a completely different story.* Who would have dreamed that the Creator of all things would descend from his greatness to this sin-sick world in order to serve us, and begin his physical life as a single, fertilized egg in the womb of an as yet unmarried teenage girl?

Who would have imagined that the almighty, omniscient, sovereign and great God, in the Incarnation of Jesus, would become, at least in human estimation, small and insignificant?

Would anyone, in a millions years, have dared to conceive that the one true God who created all that we see and all that we cannot would himself be conceived and then enter his own creation from the loins of a teenager? What human could have foreseen God in the flesh, unable to speak or control his bodily functions, humanly depending on his teenage mother for food, shelter and love? No human would have written God into the script the way the Divine Author wrote himself into the Christmas story.

Were Joseph and Mary expecting a perfect Currier and Ives Christmas when they arrived in Bethlehem, exhausted and hungry, only to find the only lodging available to be filled with animal deposits, smells and sounds?

They had no way of knowing it, but they found out that God often hides the greatest of gifts in the most unexpected places and packages. God gave us his Son in a way that we would have never expected or anticipated—as a baby wrapped in poverty and humility.

Jesus descended from greatness so that he might be our servant. He was born to one of his own created humans so that all humans might experience a new, spiritual birth. He became poor that we might be rich. He “became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14, *The Message*).

He pitched his tent in our back yard, so that he could be close to us. He didn’t arrive in regal glory, move into a mansion and surround himself with walls, expecting us to serve him, but instead he came in humility and poverty in order to more effectively serve us.

Jesus came to serve us, to give his life as a ransom for many. Christmas is about the radical self-sacrifice of Jesus, who brings us good news. *The good news* is that we cannot earn his approval by serving him.

*The good news* is that we don’t have to create a perfect Christmas on the basis of our efforts—or a perfect anything for that matter. *The good news* is that the perfect holy God loves us in spite of who we really are, in spite of the fact that we are incapable of producing a perfect Christmas.

*The good news* is that a perfect Christmas is an impossible human dream, but the flip side of that good news is that “nothing is impossible with God” (Luke 1:37) and that he, by his grace, has already given us the perfect Christmas.

*The good news* is that grace arrives in the person of Jesus. Trust in him. Receive him. Accept him, for he is the greatest gift you can ever receive. (Adapted—originally published November, 2005).

## He Came Anyway

It was the first Christmas—Joseph, Mary, Jesus and the animals were in the stable looking so calm and serene. At least that’s what the Christmas cards ask us to believe. If we accept the greeting card version of the first Christmas, we must assume that Jesus was born in a sanitized petting zoo. But greeting cards are not photographs, they are romanticized impressions. They don’t tell the real story.

If all you know about the first Christmas is a greeting-card Christmas, then you might very well visualize an idyllic picture of the first Christmas. What really happened? A teenage girl gave birth to her firstborn. In her heart she knew that she was a virgin, but she was tortured with what everyone else would surely say. She, Joseph and Jesus would live with nasty gossip for a long time. Jesus’ birth was a scandal that compromised religious values and morality.

Mary was ready to deliver, but Joseph and Mary couldn’t find a place to stay, so they were forced to welcome their son into the world in a barn. There was no room in the inn, no room in a clean or warm environment, so a barnyard had to do.

King Herod had heard that a king was going to be born in Bethlehem, and Herod wasn’t ready to give up his throne. So just to make sure this pretender to his throne would be “taken care of,” King Herod ordered all the boys in Bethlehem two years old and under to be killed. For Herod, there was no room for Jesus in Bethlehem.

You know the story—an angel warned Joseph of the planned massacre, so the new family escaped to Egypt, returning only when Herod died. So Jesus, God in the flesh, came to save us, but there were no parties, no Christmas trees, no lights, no pageants and no ceremonies. There was no room in Judea (the people to whom he had come) so the family had to move to Egypt, one of the places most despised by Jews.

Joseph, Mary and Jesus became fugitives on the run, running from the very people to whom Jesus came, forced to seek refuge in a place believed to be God forsaken. *There was no room for Jesus in God-fearing, church-going religious society.* There was no room for Jesus in the inn, no room in Bethlehem and no room in all of Judea.

Suppose you were invited to a high school reunion or a wedding. If you knew ahead of time that you would be subjected to a rude reception, why would you even show up? That's one of the amazing things about Christmas—God knew exactly how he would be treated, and *he came anyway.*

Later in Jesus' ministry, the Pharisees challenged Jesus, and their rejection of Jesus went back to that first Christmas. One of the Pharisees' great claims to fame was their physical and spiritual origins. They took great pride in their impeccable family tree. Father Abraham himself was part of their gene pool.

The Pharisees believed their own birth to be religiously pure, and now this "illegitimate" Jesus was questioning their religion, traditions and cherished ways of doing things. They determined to kill him. Jesus reminded these religious leaders that the true spiritual descendants of Abraham would not be plotting murder. The best the Pharisees could offer in reply was that at least *they* were not illegitimate children (John 8:41).

The Gospel of John summarizes the rude reception Jesus received; "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to

that which was his own, but his own did not receive him" (John 1:10-11).

So why did he come anyway? God knows the end from the beginning. He was not only the Creator of the world, but he was and is the author of our story—the God of history. *He came into our world and into our lives fully aware of the rude reception he would receive.*

God knew that humans are unforgiving. God knew that life on earth would not be easy for a child born into a heavily religious society, a child whose illegitimacy would offend established religious values. Why did God choose to be born that way?

Birth is a foundational reason Jesus came—not his birth, but ours. *He came so that we could be spiritually reborn, so that we could leave the spiritually polluted barnyards of our lives and be given spotless eternal rooms in God's house.* Jesus came to make room for us, even though he knew he would be greeted with the "no vacancy" sign at every turn and corner of his physical, earthly life.

The next two verses of the first chapter of John tell us why he came and why he was born in the unorthodox way he was. "Yet to all who received him, to those he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God" (John 1:12-13). This is the greatest love story of all time, there is no greater love, no greater beauty, no greater sacrifice. He "made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant" (Philippians 2:7).

*He came anyway.* He came so we could be given a new birth, a new life—so we could have the hope of an eternal future in God's kingdom of heaven. He came to a place of scorn and corruption so we might rise out of that same swamp of captivity, rising with him from death to eternal life. He came so we could be reborn.

Christmas is a reminder of our own spiritual rebirth—an annual, priceless invitation to escape the barnyards of our own lives. Merry Christmas! (*Adapted—originally published November, 2006.*)

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