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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION



Our Ultimate Caregiver

by Brad Jersak

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Jorge Cocco Santiago 2019

Our Ultimate Caregiver

by Brad Jersak

CAREGIVERS

For a decade of what feels like another lifetime (1998-2008), I led a faith community of which one-third of our attendees were people with mental or physical disabilities in full-time care. Their struggles included Down Syndrome, autism, brain injuries, and a host of neurological conditions and disorders that confined these dear friends to wheelchairs. Their appearance, their sounds, their smells were so attention-grabbing that one might overlook the constant, active presence of their ‘caregivers.’

These caregivers were responsible for 24-7 assistance in every area of their ‘client’s’ lives, including clothing them, feeding them, administering their medications, bathing them and changing their adult diapers. They worked courageously to alleviate their suffering, protect

them from self-harm and accidents and to provide them with life-affirming experiences. These caregivers—the ones who truly saw it as their vocation—knew that care is more than a warm feeling or sense of concern in their hearts. Caregiving was a full-time job that included hands-on involvement.

During that same season of life, I also witnessed and experienced an excess of human tragedy. Yes, I could trust that God loves us in some overarching way. But the pain I saw and felt blinded me to God’s active caregiving. While others tried to assure me that God cares, what came to mind was the adage, “Your heavenly Father sees every sparrow that falls—but they still fall.” Similarly, “God sends the sunshine and the showers on the crops of both the just and the unjust—and also the tornadoes?” God’s so-called care seemed abstract to the point of offensive. God didn’t seem to care like the caregivers I knew.



GOD, DO YOU CARE?

With that backstory, I have been contemplating the story of Lazarus' death and resurrection (in John 11) from the point of view of his grieving sisters, Mary and Martha. It's too easy for us to hover above the story, racing too quickly to its powerful, happy ending. Mary and Martha had no such viewpoint. They couldn't skip through to the end. They had to live the story one gruelling movement at a time—waiting in vain for Jesus to arrive in time.

They certainly had great faith in the midst of grief and tragedy. They fully believed Jesus would show up and heal their brother. He could have done something to prevent Lazarus' death—even at a distance. No doubt about it—they knew he cared. But then he didn't arrive on time. Not even close. Didn't he care?

Sure, they knew that Jesus could raise Lazarus to life on the Last Day at the resurrection. And he will. But in this in-between time ("between the graveyard and the garden," as my friend Jason Upton sings), there is grief. Especially grief about what God has allowed. Our bewildered grief gives rise to the question, "Don't you care? You could have... but you didn't."

GOD, DON'T YOU CARE?

Has your life experience ever left you with questions? Sometimes the questions scare us. We worry that raising our doubts might offend God or be heard as a blasphemous accusation. And other times, we do use it as a rhetorical accusation as we slam

the door in God's face. "Don't you care" becomes "How dare you!"

My suggestion: don't be afraid to be gut level honest with God—our Father can handle it. But then, when you're able, have the courage to keep the conversation alive. Go ahead and ask, "God, don't you care?" then stick around for God's response.

Can you think of the particular times when God seemed to abandon you to the cruelties of life? I can. Then I close my eyes, I imagine I'm Mary or Martha, I look Jesus in the face and ask him outright. "God, do you care?" Then I remember how he responded in the story. Do you remember? Jesus wept. No clever answer, no justification, no explanation. His tears said, "Yes, I care. More than you know."

GOD, HOW HAVE YOU CARED FOR ME?

Being part of the Body of Christ means that through you, God can care for others. The divine Caregiver may extend your attention, your empathy and your hands of service in Jesus' name (even anonymously!). Those to whom we extend God's active care may begin to notice that God is not distant, absent, or silent after all. They will be able to witness and experience God's caregiving for themselves and give thanks.

We might say that as we are "the Body of Christ," God borrows our ears, eyes, mouths, hands, feet, even our wallets (!) to demonstrate his love as real-life caregiving. But rather than rushing around doing what we think Jesus might want us to do, I recommend pausing to ask, "God, how would you like to

JESUS ON OUR CAREGIVING FATHER

(from Matthew 6)

²⁵ "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?"

²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

²⁸ "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?"

³¹ So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

care *through* me today? Who would you like to care for? If you need to borrow my life to actively care, here I am?"

As we pause, instead of being reactive rescuers who scramble around and make matters worse, we have a moment of clarity

Jorge Cocco Santangelo, based in Dallas, TX, is our feature artist in this issue of CWRm. His online gallery is at www.jorgecocco.com

where we know in our heart who we should help and how we can care. Again, nothing dramatic here. But grace has a way of opening our eyes to the real needs and how to meet them.

I'm always happy to hear uplifting accounts of God's infinite caregiving visiting God's children through willing helpers.

I JUST KNOW WE'LL BE OKAY

I'll leave you with a simple example that illustrates God's humility as a subtle caregiver that may open our eyes to how God's care permeates our world, often as apparent coincidences with the fingerprint of love.

A friend of mine (I'll call him

Keith) had been laid off from work just as his hearing declined to the point of needing expensive hearing aids. His wife's modest income and Keith's employment insurance only covered their mortgage costs and basic living expenses, so the \$5000 charge was

far beyond their means. Anxiety was high,

and Keith's nerves were already worn thin. In desperation, they prayed together and, gratefully, they felt God's peace settle into their hearts immediately. Keith's wife said, "You need these hearing aids. Just put them on the credit card. *I just know we'll be okay.*" My friend felt it, too—the divine Caregiver settled Keith's racing mind, and he surrendered his circumstances to God's care, come what may. We might call such experiences a form of God's "internal care."

On the same day that Keith saw his ear doctor, put his hearing aids in his ears and on his card, he met three friends for dinner, two were atheists and one was "spiritual-but-not-Christian." Keith didn't

mention his situation at all—nothing about their income, bills, or the cost of the hearing aids. But at some point, during the meal, one of the atheists turned to Keith and said, "I've been thinking about you and all the good you do in our community. And I felt like I wanted to do something for you to show my appreciation."

His atheist "angel" pulled out his pen and wrote out a check on the spot for—you guessed it—exactly \$5000.

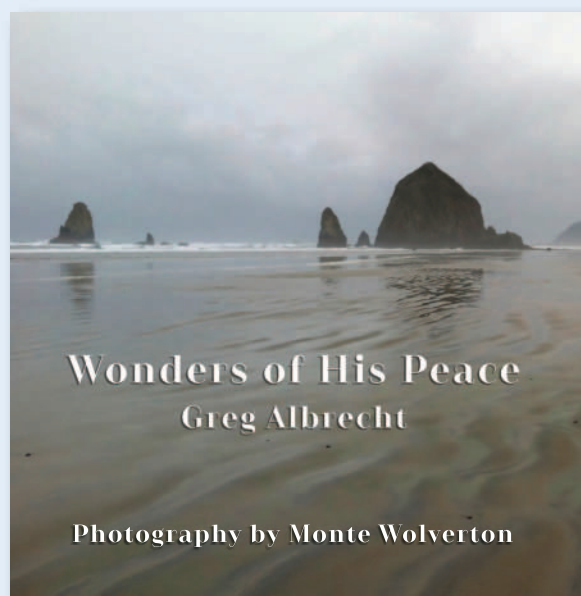
It doesn't always work that way. But on that day, that's what happened. God's care included an internal peace and an external friend—not a "miracle" or a magical money tree. But Keith trusts the truth that God not only cares, but that God is his Caregiver. Even better, when Keith reflected the story back to his atheist friend, the man wept openly. Why do you suppose that is? His tears said, "*If there's a God after all... One who would care for Keith's family so specifically through me, then maybe that same God cares for me, too!*" □

Brad Jersak is an editor at CWRm and author of the More Christlike trilogy.

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Incomparable & Boundless

by Greg Albrecht

“... *the incomparable riches of his grace.*”

—Ephesians 2:7

“... *the boundless riches of Christ.*”

—Ephesians 3:8

You know the story: a newly married couple, exhausted from a long trip, expecting a baby any day, arrived in town and were unable to find a place to stay. The only decorations and ornaments in Bethlehem that first Christmas were “No Vacancy” signs.

It happened during the reign of Caesar Augustus (27 BC-AD 14). Mary, a young teenage girl, heavy with child, looked like she was about ready to pop—at this final stage of her pregnancy her efforts at ambulating would better be described as “waddling” rather than “walking.”

Perhaps it was best for Joseph and Mary to leave their hometown and be surrounded with strangers, away from people who thought they knew the real story of their young life together. As you know, even though they were married, Joseph wasn’t the birth father of the baby that Mary was expecting.

Were Joseph and Mary to suddenly appear, in our city or town or suburb, looking exactly like they did then, we would without a doubt think of them as homeless—we might even say that they seemed to be living rough.

As the time for Mary to give birth was near, they had to find some shelter—they found that shelter in a place that reeked of the smells of urine and dung. And there it was, in such a place, that the majesty of God in the person of Jesus entered into our mundane world.

What was really going on there in Bethlehem? It was the most critically important and historically significant moment in time, yet the circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus looked for all the world as unimportant and insignificant. It was, as it turns out, a time and event that was and is ***Incomparable and Boundless.***

It was *a brief and fleeting moment* that passed without fanfare at the time—a scene and time of

incredible irony. The real significance of what was happening was buried, like artifacts under layers of civilization, buried, as was the floor of the stable, beneath animal manure.

The baby had created the universe, but he had voluntarily left the pristine perfection of eternity in favor of the mud and filth of that stable—and the dust and grime of the world that he would inhabit as he grew up. He chose to come as a baby who would be delivered via the birth canal and then later spiritually deliver not only Mary, the one who had physically delivered him, but ALL mankind, including those who tortured and crucified him. ***Incomparable and Boundless.***

Here, in a tiny little backwater town of Bethlehem, our Creator, the Prince of Peace



arrived looking more like a little prune-faced pauper than an adorable Gerber baby born into comfort, safety and hygiene. The first Christmas was a long way from the adorable depictions of baby Jesus we see today, in front yards, on Christmas trees and over the mantle of fireplaces. 2000 years later Jesus has been, in the popular version that is taught and imbibed, adorable, repackaged and shrink-wrapped.

watch and then either retires or moves on to other tasks.

The birth of Jesus tells us that Jesus is God our Creator, and that as our Creator he is not detached. The heart and soul of this universe is a personal God, not a humanly fabricated device that whirs and buzzes and eventually blows fuses and circuits, only to crash and burn and melt down as all machines eventually do.

Christmas reminds us that God

Jesus' incarnation, his birth as God in the flesh helped humans come to know and comprehend God. Jesus is not just a man who lived and died and was buried. Jesus cannot be relegated to a cemetery or a dusty bookshelf in a library, because while he did exist, and while he died as we all do, he was resurrected and is alive right now. Jesus is indestructible, the eternal, true and gracious super-hero, if you like. Jesus will never melt-down, he will never crash and burn. He will always be for us, with us and one of us. ***Incomparable and Boundless.***

CHRISTMAS REMINDS US: GOD IN CHRIST WORKS IN MYSTERIOUS WAYS

Jesus, God incarnate, is the head of a universal, boundaryless spiritual community. God's work is mysterious to the human mind so that hope sometimes comes from the most unexpected places and most unlikely people. Jesus is truly ***Incomparable and Boundless.***

How amazing and stupendous, and how paradoxical is Jesus—and how truly he reveals the mind and heart of God, who is, above all, love. Here is a human, born as an impoverished baby, born in such a way, by God's plan, that his human birthright might be held up to question.

There truly was nothing about Jesus that *appeared* to be beautiful, inspiring, amazing or majestic. Jesus did not *appear* to be incredibly successful. Jesus did not *appear* to be someone to whom people would naturally flock, putting all of their hopes and dreams on him.



It is easy for the secularized and commercialized Jesus to overshadow and overwhelm the ***Incomparable and Boundless*** meaning behind Christmas—here are three perspectives that might bring spiritual focus:

CHRISTMAS REMINDS US: GOD IS ONE OF US, WITH US & FOR US

Christmas means that God is not detached from his creation. God's relationship with our world and our universe is personal, as contrasted with the god some propose who is a watch-maker-creator as he/she fashions a

loves us, and that we are not just a number or a bit of information stored somewhere on his hard drive. Christmas reminds us that Jesus is indestructible, the grave could not hold him. Jesus will not melt down, crash or burn. He will, as he reminds us elsewhere, never leave or abandon us.

The glorious truth, the BEST NEWS EVER, is that ***God is always One of Us, One with us and One for us.*** Jesus came to reveal the Father—the triune Godhead, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus came to reveal God to us—God is exactly like Jesus!

(continued on page 8)

Christmas: Only One Message

by *Richard Rohr*

And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth. —John 1:14

The Christmas message is ultimately about “union,” the healing of our separate selves and world through Christ:

I know because it's Christmas Eve, you're surely hoping for some very special meditation. I don't think I have one, because there's really only one message. If we're praying, it goes deeper and deeper and deeper. If we're quiet once in a while, even on a busy day like today, it goes deeper and deeper and deeper still.

There's really only one message, and we just have to keep saying it until finally we're undefended enough to hear it and to believe it: there is no separation between God and creation. That's the message. But we can't believe it.

And so this Word, this Eternal Word of God that we read about in the prologue to John's Gospel, “leapt down” and took his abiding place on Earth, in order to heal every bit of separation and splitness that we experience. That splitness and separation is the sadness of the human race. When we feel separate, when we feel disconnected, when we feel split from ourselves, from our family, from reality, from the Earth, from God, we will be angry and depressed people. Because we know we weren't created for that separateness; we were created for union.

So God sent into the world one who would personify that union—who would put human and divine together; who would put spirit and matter together. That's what we spend our whole life trying to believe: that this ordinary earthly sojourn means something.

Sometimes we wake up in the morning wondering, what does it all mean? What's it all for? What was I put here for? Where is it all heading?

I believe it's all a school. And it's all a school of love. And everything is a lesson—everything. Every

day, every moment, every visit to the grocery store, every moment of our so-ordinary life is meant to reveal, “My God, I'm a daughter of God! I'm a son of the Lord! I'm a sibling of Christ! It's all okay. I'm already home free! There's no place I have to go. I'm already here!” But if we don't enjoy that, if we don't allow that, basically we fall into meaninglessness.



Friends, we need to surrender to some kind of ultimate meaning. We need to desire it, seek it, want it and need it. I know no one likes to hear this, but we even need to suffer for it. And what is suffering? Suffering is the emptying out of the soul so there's room for love, so there's room for the Christ, so there's room for God. □

Adapted from Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations. Used by Permission of the Center for Action and Contemplation.

INCOMPARABLE & BOUNDLESS (continued from page 6)

If you are familiar at all with financial investments, you will know that new companies offer an IPO (initial public offering). This is an attempt to raise capital for the idea and the promise of their products—they attempt to provide investors an incredible return on their financial support.

Using that idea as an analogy of the world of Jesus, the religious stock market traders (religious authorities) would never have dreamed of investing in Jesus. They saw him as an abject failure, when measured from their standards of spiritual success.

As religious stock market traders they were not about to “put their clients into Jesus.”

They were, on the other hand, all about killing him because they feared the radical nature of the kingdom he preached and represented.

CHRISTMAS REMINDS US: THE BEST IS PERHAPS WHAT WE UNDERSTAND THE LEAST

The great promise of Christmas is what we might call the end game—what Jesus brings about and produces. As a result of the birth of God in the flesh, he, our risen Lord, might actually live his life in us. This new life in Christ, enabled by the riches of God’s grace, is a miraculous mystery.

Speaking of Jesus, Paul says in Colossians 1:19, “*For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.*”

It is no exaggeration to say that the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus are, as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:3, of “first importance.” How *exactly* they are of first importance—how they accomplish so much—how Jesus is the center and core of our faith, is never a reality we can fully grasp while we are in this flesh.

We do know, however, in order to live in us, Jesus first became one of us, with us, and then gave himself for us, and finally then to rise from his tomb so that we might live in him and he in us.

Christmas truly is Incomparable and Boundless. □

Greg Albrecht is president of Plain Truth Ministries.

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