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Christmas Eve 2008

Isaiah 9: 2-7
Luke 2: 1-20

God With Us

Let's just face it: in some ways, it seems like a bad year for Christmas. With all of the anxiety over our economy, people losing their jobs, losing their homes, their investments, I am sure some feel that the last thing we need is Christmas with all of its expectations for celebration and gift giving. Many of us are too worried to celebrate and the last thing we want to think about is spending money on gifts. Of course, we know the retail industry thinks Christmas is coming at just the right time, although, in all likelihood, even it will not be enough to remedy our precarious economic situation.

Earlier in the month, perhaps hoping to capitalize on the generous holiday spirit, GM published a full page ad in *Automotive News* magazine. It included this apology to the American public: "While we're still the U.S. sales leader, we acknowledge we have disappointed you. At times we violated your trust by letting our quality fall below industry standards and our designs become lackluster. We proliferated our brands and dealer network to the point where we lost adequate focus on our core U.S. market. We also biased our product mix toward pickup trucks and SUVs. And we made commitments to compensation plans that have proven to be unsustainable in today's globally competitive industry. We have paid dearly for these decisions, learned from them and are working hard to correct them by restructuring our U.S. business to be viable for the long-term."

Author and blogger Jim Wallis has an interesting take on GM's apology, our economic crisis and its relation to our faith. He writes, "Part of what scares us when we see a company like GM collapsing is that we can see our own vices writ large against the sky...It may sound like an oversimplification, especially in light of all of the complex market instruments that are in use today, but at the root of all of this financial mess and turmoil are broken relationships...The relationship between employer and employee. The relationship between corporations and community. The relationship between stock holders and executives. The relationship between consumers and their creditors. The relationship between the businesses, the government, and our civic institutions. The relationship between people and the planet we live on. These relationships are broken, distorted, and even abandoned." He goes on to write, "The heart of our faith is about relationships. How they are broken and how they are fixed. Righteousness is the term we use that means 'right relationships.'"¹

It seems to me that an appropriate way to characterize the meaning of Christmas is that God initiated a relationship of trust with us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. In Jesus we see God's righteousness, the right relationship God intends for us, both God with humanity and humanity with itself and the planet. John Buchanan, pastor of Fourth Presbyterian in Chicago puts it like this: "The story of Jesus' birth is a worldly, earthy story: a man and a woman pushed around by impersonal political dynamics, powerless victims of Roman imperial decrees; a long arduous journey; an inn already crowded with guests; a birth out back in the dirt and chaos of a cow barn."

"Think of what the story says about God—about how vulnerable God is. God puts this whole project in the hands of a carpenter and his wife. God comes in way that forces

¹ <http://www.sojo.net/blog/godspolitics/2008/12/11/apology-accepted/>.

individuals to make decisions and act on them. God becomes vulnerable to, subject to, human beings whose decisions and actions will or will not advance God's kingdom. When God acts, it is not a matter of pulling strings, pulling off great cosmic miracles. It is a matter of stirring a man or a woman to be responsible, to live and act faithfully, to do what God wants done. [On this night] Much of the world will stop for a time again to listen to a story that they already know—the story about God's vulnerability, God's love and God's presence in the midst of life at its most human."²

At first glance it may seem like a bad year for Christmas, like perhaps we should wait until we get some things straightened out, until we are better prepared. But then again, maybe that is exactly what makes this the perfect timing. Because underneath all of our carols and candles, insinuated in our presents, decorations and traditions is a message, a promise, that cannot be covered up by the commercialism or the sentimentality or even by our fears, economic or otherwise: it is a message that is not out of tune or out of touch with our ongoing concerns, but one that cuts right to the heart of them. It is the message that God is with us in the midst of life at its most human; the message that in Jesus, God has initiated a relationship of trust with us and is stirring us to be responsible, to live and act faithfully, compassionately. Tonight we celebrate the beauty and mystery of our faith: in a little child born long ago we can see ourselves anew. We can re-imagine our world and allow the spark of faith and hope to be rekindled in each of us, because *"to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."* All Glory be to God. Amen.

² From the Editor's Desk by John Buchanan in *The Christian Century*, December 16, 2008, p 3.