

## Christmas 2011 RPUC

Meditation - What if God was one of us?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord. Amen

‘The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.’

Most of the time we talk about God’s presence with us as spirit. But what if God was one of us? As we heard in song played earlier, the refrain asks:

What if God was one of us?  
Just a slob like one of us?  
Just a stranger on a bus  
Tryin’ to make his way home.

Some critics took offense at these lyrics, especially the “slob” part.

To some, the idea that God might be sitting next to you on the bus ride home from work was inconceivable.

Others thought the song was a cynical putdown of faith.

But I think it is an interesting idea, in fact, a key idea.

What if God was one of us; a God not “up there” but right here with us?

Well, that would change everything.

What if God had to ride the bus and go through the daily hassles we have, maybe, then God would understand our troubles and our lives better.

A God who knows our hurts and longings; a God who can identify with the things that make up our everyday lives.

What if God was one of us, God would know what it’s like to feel love, joy, sorrow, disappointment, temptation, betrayal, loneliness and loss, just like we do.

What if God had an earthly body, God would know what it's like to feel hunger, thirst, weariness, pain; God would know what it is like to suffer and die.

What if God was one of us, God would be able to identify fully with you and me.

Well, God had that same idea long - long ago.

In the church, we call it the incarnation. It literally means "in the flesh."

It can also mean to give form and substance to an insubstantial quality.

And so an extraordinarily giving person may be called the 'very incarnation of generosity'.

Their actions give substance to the quality.

John said, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

The "Word" John speaks of is more than the things God says.

It is the very mind of God Almighty.

The character of God including God's love, righteousness and mercy.

The Good News is that we don't have to ask "what if?" because God DID become one of us.

God became fully human, in the person of Jesus, so that God does know and feel what it's like to be human.

Today we celebrate. We celebrate the birth of a baby.

Now most babies births are celebrated but this one is special.

This baby would grow up to become a sign, a symbol, a voice for God - for us, he is God's word of love made manifest in this world.

And this is a great day indeed and we should celebrate it – for without this baby where would we be today?

On Christmas Day we reflect on the deeper meaning of the Incarnation, for it shows the potential divinity in all human beings.

There is in each of us that which can be, in fact, is in relationship with the Spirit of Life, with our deepest Source, with our most cherished sense of the Holy, or the Wholeness, of which we are a part.

I want to tell you two stories which show what this might mean in our lives :

“A pastor in New York City tells the story of Phil, one of his parishioners who is a street person. Schizophrenic and homeless, Phil refuses to stay in a shelter.

And so he spends his nights sleeping in doorways, and he spends his days in church.

“He keeps us honest,” says the pastor.

Once during a funeral service of a prominent lawyer, Phil – filthy and dressed in rags – sat in the back of the church.

The law partner of the deceased came up to the pastor and said, “Can you get him out of here?”

The pastor answered, “Yes, I can get him out; but you should know, that if he leaves, I go with him.

He belongs here; he’s been a member of this parish for ten years.”

One Christmas Eve after the service, the parishioners were enjoying cookies and coffee together in the Fellowship Hall when out of the sanctuary arose a magnificent voice singing “O Holy Night.”

It was a trained, professional voice, radically beautiful, and everyone stopped to listen, awed by the holiness of the moment.

When the singing ended, they rushed into the church to find the source of the music. And there they found Phil.

That Christmas Eve, God had appeared through homeless and ragged Phil.”

In the story of Phil, we are reminded that the spirit of God lives in each one of us, even those who seem different, strange and embarrassing to us.

The second story:

“There's an old Hassidic story that concerns a monastery that had fallen upon hard times.

You may have heard this story before but I invite you to listen as though this were the first time. It's called "The Rabbi's Gift."

This monastery was once a great order, but as a result of anti-monastic persecution in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the rise of secularism in the nineteenth, all its branch houses were lost.

and all that remained in the mother house were five monks: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age.

Clearly the monastery was dying out.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage.

Through their many years of prayer and contemplation, the old monks had become a bit psychic, so they could always sense when the rabbi was in his hermitage.

"The rabbi is in the woods, the rabbi is in the woods," they would whisper to each other.

As the old abbot agonized over the death of his order, it occurred to him one time to visit the hermitage, and ask the rabbi if he might have any advice that might help save the monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate.

"I know how it is," he exclaimed. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore."

Then they wept together, and read part of the Torah together, and quietly spoke of deep things.

They embraced each other when the time came for the abbot to leave.

"It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years," the abbot said. "But I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?"

"No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is among you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery, his fellow monks gathered around him, asking, "Well, what did the rabbi say?"

"He couldn't help," the abbot answered. "We just wept and read the Torah together."

The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving, was quite cryptic.

He said that the Messiah is among us. I don't know what he meant."

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered the rabbi's words. The Messiah is among us?

Could he possibly have meant that one of us monks here at the monastery is the Messiah? If so, which one?

Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot.

On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man, everyone knows it!

Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets so crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Maybe the rabbi did mean him.

But surely not Brother Phillip. He's so passive, a real nobody. But then, he does have a gift for always being there when you need him, appearing almost magically by your side. Maybe it is Phillip.

Of course, the rabbi didn't mean me - I'm so ordinary. Yet, supposing he did? Suppose I'm the Messiah?

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah.

And on the off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect as well.

Because the forest around the monastery was beautiful, it so happened that people occasionally came to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate.

As they did so, without being conscious of it, they sensed this aura of extraordinary respect that had begun to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place.

It was quite compelling. Hardly knowing why, visitors came back again and again, and brought friends.

Some of those who came, young men, began to talk with the monks more and more, and before long, a few of them asked if they could join the order.

Then more joined, and more, and within a few years, thanks to the rabbi's gift, the monastery had once again become a thriving order and a vibrant center of spirituality for all the people."

What a wonderful vision – of individuals and a community renewed through the recognition of God's holiness in their lives and the lives of those around them.

That is indeed a vision for us.

A Christian might name the God which accompanies, this "God-with-us," Jesus the Christ.

But that's not who Jesus himself set out to be. (scholars of the Jesus Seminar, Marcus Borg, who is distinguished professor of Religion and Culture at Oregon State University).

Jesus was person who did not claim to be God, but who had a powerful, personal experience of God.

For Jesus, God was compassionate, and he had an ongoing relationship with God like that of a son with his father.

What Jesus wanted was for others to have this kind of relationship with God, too.

The Incarnation reminds us that this relationship, this divinity, enters the world through us, and that we must do more than speak it; we must live it with our love and compassion.

We are asked to love one another.

We never know how or where or when Christ might show up.

*Every* moment is alive with the possibility of Christ being born in our lives, because he surprises us by coming *at* the time, and *in* the places, and *through* the people we least expect.

In the words of poet Ann Weems, "Christmas comes every time we see God in other persons. The human and the holy meet in Bethlehem or in Times Square...

What if God was one of us? God is one of us; Christ is in all of us.

We all have the potential to incarnate the divine spark of compassion and help move our world toward greater wholeness.

And this is what Christmas is all about.

But what if God is one of us – you and me? Right here! Right now!

Would we know Christ if he or she was in our midst?

Could Christ be that young child squirming in the pew;

Could Christ be the man two rows back who always sings off-key;

Could Christ be the gossip, the smoker, the one who drinks or swears, the one who is bossy and impatient;

Could Christ be the one who only comes to church on Easter and Christmas, the one who cannot walk or see or hear well.

Turn, look around, look at your neighbor – what if they are Christ in the world!  
Take a moment and really look at them!

How might you treat them differently knowing they are Christ in the world?

And look at your hands, feel them – are they cold or hot, rough or smooth – what if these are the hands of Christ in the world!

How might you be different knowing you are Christ in the world?

What if God was one of us?  
Just a slob like one of us?  
Just a stranger on a bus  
Tryin' to make his way home.

Today, Christmas Day suggests... no, asks...no, implores us to make this real in the world, to do as Jesus did - to bind up the broken, befriend the lonely, welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, work for justice.

Like the monks, we are asked to treat ourselves and each other with extraordinary respect, and to respect the inherent worth and dignity of all persons.

Year in, year out, despite how commercial and secular it gets, Christmas stays special because it is about God's love, God's desire to be in relationship with us, and God's longing for us to love and be in relationship with each other as Christ.

It's Christmas, a time of new beginnings.

Today, Christ waits to be recognized in our hearts and to live within us, for it is *with* and *in* all people – in you and in me – that Christ dwells.

Come, let us celebrate God's most wondrous gift to us!!

Let us pray:

God with us, today we celebrate your most marvelous gift to us – a child. A child who showed us your amazing love. Open our eyes and hearts to your presence and love lived out through others; open us to the realization that, almost inconceivably, you also live in us. Guide us as we begin anew to be your presence in the world. Amen.