

It's been a long time since I've actually preached on this story. The nativity story is a part of all that we think of when we think about the Christmas season. We see it displayed in Nativity scenes that range from gorgeous to super tacky.

The story can even take a backseat to shopping and decorating and cooking and baking and hosting...and exhaustion.

Hearing it in a different month gives us a chance to really contemplate the story without all the distractions of the Christmas season.

Daryl and I were in the Czech Republic a couple weeks ago. I visited two cathedrals while we were there. One of them is called the Church of Our Lady of Victories in which is housed the shrine to the Infant Jesus of Prague.

The infant Jesus of Prague is a statue of Baby Jesus in a side altar of the beautiful cathedral. Baby Jesus is always dressed in a fancy robe that matches the color of the liturgical season. He's wearing a crown and is surrounded by an ornate altar piece.

In an area off to the side of the nave, all the little robes he wears are on display. The Carmelite nuns at the church have the responsibility of dressing him.

The first time I saw the cathedral was a few years ago on a tour with the spouse of a Czech diplomat. Our tour guide told us she was an atheist. She was very bothered by the amount of money people had spent to send these ornate little robes for a baby Jesus statue.

You don't have to be an atheist to wonder if the money could be better spent on feeding the hungry or something.

But cathedrals and shrines such as the ones in Prague are designed to elicit awe and a sense of a transcendent God...a God that is far greater and far beyond what we can grasp.

Transcendence can also be the experience we have when we gaze at a starlit night or the mountains or sea.

The angels in the nativity story bring that sense of transcendence. I've sung this part of the story in Handel's Messiah before. A soprano soloist sings the angel's first words, and then the choir comes in as the multitude of heavenly hosts singing Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth. It's a breathtaking, goosebumps experience of transcendence.

People need transcendence. We need to be reminded that there is something far greater than us...we need to be reminded that we are not God...that God holds everything around us in God's hands, and we don't need to.

But the God who comes to us as a vulnerable infant, in human flesh and blood, is not just transcendent. The incarnation means that God is also immanent.

An immanent God is one who is entirely also within the world and within us. God trusted human flesh and blood enough to pack all of the transcendence and divine love and send it to earth, to walk among us.

In fact, many believe, including me, that God is immanent – God is within - all creation. That creation itself was in fact the first incarnation. In the beginning, the breath of God blew over the waters of chaos and brought a universe into being...a universe in which God is embedded.

People need immanence as well as transcendence. We need a God who is a friend, a God who sits with us in the pain and sorrows of our lives. We need a God whom we recognize in others, so that we treat other people as sacred. We need a God who is deeply imbedded in the seas and skies and mountains and plains and forests. We need a God who is within the mollusks and the birds and lizards and lions and the animals of all kinds. What's more, the earth needs us to be a people who recognize that God is within all of creation...that creation itself is sacred.

The transcendent God sparks awe in us, but also a bit of fear. When face to face with the power and grandeur of God, characters in the Bible feared death. God stands in judgment of that which has gone so tragically wrong in the world.

But with Jesus as our friend, with the divine within us, we stand before God forgiven, set free, transformed.

In Jesus, the transcendent becomes immanent, the infinite becomes finite, divine love becomes a flesh and blood body – a body that can love and laugh and cry and do all the things we do.

The transcendent and the immanent God can be hard to reconcile. How can God be beyond us but still also with us and within us?

That is the great mystery of Jesus' incarnation.

Throughout history, there have been those for whom it feels more natural to think of God only as transcendent, as a being far beyond what we can grasp.

Jesus was born into an empire that began turning their rulers into gods. A royal proclamation dated time from the birth of Caesar Augustus. Words such as good news, savior, bringer of peace, were used to describe Caesar. Augustus was a title, not a name – August might be a more familiar word to us. It means exalted or revered.

Caesar fit people's image of a powerful, transcendent god.

By contrast, the very ordinariness of the characters in Jesus' birth story set a very different tone.

It was probably a rather ordinary birth. Because of the crowds, a space in the livestock enclosure next to the house was cleared to make room for the delivery and the newborn baby.

Contrary to movies and shows, Mary and Joseph were probably not alone. A midwife was probably sent for to attend the birth, just like any other birth.

Not only did the transcendent become flesh and blood, it did so in a most humble, ordinary way.

Following Caesar's birth, neighboring royalty and dignitaries would likely have been among the earliest visitors. At Jesus birth? Shepherds received the announcement of good news first. Ordinary working men.

Both the transcendent God whose angels strike awe and maybe even fear in us, and the God who became one of the most ordinary of us have to be held in tension. It remains a mysterious and mystical part of our faith.

That doesn't mean people haven't tried to explain it, usually by preferencing one over the other. Some said Jesus wasn't really human – he only looked human.

Others said Jesus was truly only human.

We still tend to fall into one ditch or the other on a regular basis and we see it play out in our actions in the world.

When there is no sense of the transcendent, when we have nothing to remind us that there is a God beyond us...something bigger than us, we find something or someone else to put in God's place. We make people or organizations or things into God. We practice idolatry. We need transcendence, and when we don't acknowledge it in God, we will at Memorial Stadium or at the bank or in our preferred candidate for office.

We turn things and people into gods, and it all turns bad.

If we fall off the other end, and God is only a distant transcendent God, we lose sight of the fact that God is within us and within the world. We don't feel a comforting sense of God's presence when we struggle. We feel alone and can grow bitter.

Or we lose sight of the fact that the sacred dwells within all that God created. And then we feel free to exploit people and the environment. We feel free to treat some people as less than human, which can lead to outright violence.

How do we hold on to both the transcendent God and the God who is incarnate in us and in creation? We practice. We practice through worship. Worship gives us that sense of the transcendent. We can practice connecting to the God within through silence and solitude – contemplative prayer. Spending time in nature can help us do both. It can inspire us to worship the God who created it all. And it can help us connect with the God within who makes all things sacred.

And we can practice seeing God in other people. It will be a whole lot harder to hate when we practice seeing Jesus in everyone.

We may not be able to completely grasp it, but this God who is both beyond and above us yet still within us and creation is the best Christmas gift we ever got.