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 Philippians 2:3-11
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DIVINE HUMILITY

I have enjoyed the writings of Philip Yancey for many years. His new book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, is excellent. I was especially moved by his chapter on the birth of Christ, and I hope you too will be encouraged by his thoughts.

If you have noticed this year's Christmas cards, all kinds of symbols have edged their way into the celebration. Most cards portray a New England town buried in snow, usually with the added touch of a horse-drawn sleigh. Others feature frolicking animals, and not only reindeer but chipmunks and raccoons—even birds.

Angels have made a big comeback in recent years. Hallmark and American Greetings cards now feature them prominently, although as modest, cuddly looking creatures, not the type who would ever need to announce, "Fear not!" Explicitly religious cards (a distinct minority) focus on the Holy Family. You can tell quickly that these folk are different. They seem unruffled and serene. Bright gold halos, like crowns from another world, hover over their heads. The message inside stresses sunny words, like love, goodwill, cheer, happiness, and warmth.

I suppose it is a good thing to honor such a sacred holiday as Christmas with homey sentiments. And yet, when we read the gospel accounts of the Christmas story we sense a very different tone. The Christmas story is a strange story indeed. It reminds me of an episode of *Thirtysomething*. Hope, a Christian, is arguing with her Jewish husband Michael about the holidays. "Why do you even bother with Hanukkah?" she asks. "Do you really believe a handful of Jews held off a huge army by using a bunch of lamps that miraculously wouldn't run out of oil?" Michael exploded, "Oh, and Christmas makes more sense? Do you really believe an angel appeared to some teenage girl who then got pregnant without ever having sex, and traveled on horseback to Bethlehem, where she spent the night in a barn, and had a baby who turned out to be the Savior of the world?"

I must admit that Michael's skepticism seems closer to what I read in the gospels. The Christmas story is such a strange story.

The facts of Christmas, rhymed in carols, recited in plays, illustrated in cards, have become so familiar that it is easy to miss the message behind them. I had to ask myself, "If Jesus came to reveal God to us, what do I

learn about God from that first Christmas?"

Most of us do not have a clear picture of God in our minds. Last Sunday, I had the privilege of preaching a Christmas message to a hundred inmates of Juvenile Hall. These boys and girls certainly do not have a clear picture in their minds of who God is. Their images of him have been damaged and distorted through things that had happened to them and from circumstances in their families that would make us wince. Some of them tended to relate to God, not based on how he has revealed himself, but through the pain they suffered as children or through the bitter memories of some pastor or priest who "put the fear of God" into them. Others related to God based on memories of the father who battered them, shamed them, abandoned them, a taskmaster who flew off the handle at the smallest slight and never gave them the time of day.

But God is not like that at all.

The Christmas story reveals how unlike us God really is. It is such a strange story. "Humble" is the word that comes to my mind as I read it.

Before Jesus, hardly any secular authors had used "humble" as a complement. Yet the events of Christmas point inescapably to what seems like an oxymoron: a humble God. The God who came to earth came not in a raging whirlwind or in a devouring fire. Unimaginably, the Maker of all things shrank down, down, down, so small as to become an ovum, a single fertilized egg, barely visible to the naked eye, an egg that divided and re-divided until a fetus took shape, enlarging cell by cell inside a nervous teenager. "Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb," marveled the poet John Donne. Paul put it this way in Philippians, "He made himself nothing...He humbled himself."

The Messiah who was born in Bethlehem wore a different kind of glory: it was the glory of humility. "'God is great,' the cry of the Moslems, is a truth which needed no supernatural being to teach men," writes Father Neville Figgis. "That *God is little*, that is the truth which Jesus taught man." The God who roared, who could order armies and empires about like pawns on a chessboard emerged in Bethlehem as a Baby who could not speak, eat solid food or control his bladder. The God of glory depended on a teenager for shelter, food, and love.

In our world, a brief visit by royalty to a foreign country can cost millions of dollars. In meek contrast, God's visit to earth took place in an animal shelter, with no attendants present and nowhere to lay the newborn King but a feed trough. The event that divides history, and even our calendars, into two parts may have had more animal than human witnesses. A mule could have stepped on him.

"How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given."

I can't think of any more humble circumstances for the entrance of the Son of God into the world. On the night when the angels appeared near Bethlehem, Caesar would have been sleeping in Rome on a golden bed beneath sheets of fine linen. He would have been attended by servants, protected by the Praetorian guard and many of his legions.

How different it was for Mary. She was only minutes removed from delivery on that night. Exhausted from the long journey, she arrived in Bethlehem but there was no place to stay except an animal enclosure. In contrast to Caesar, the baby Jesus was wrapped in swaddling clothes and placed in a manger. His attendants were beasts.

And it was shepherds, men who had such a bad reputation they were lumped together with the "godless" by proper Jews, it was they whom God selected to see the spectacle of the multitude of angels and join in the celebration of the birth of the One who would be known as the Friend of sinners.

If we were to apply the world's standards, no one in the Christmas story would be chosen. Why? It was because they did not have any influence. They were not famous. They were not possessed with great intelligence or winning personalities. But they were teachable! They were honest enough to admit their own need for a Savior and they were humble enough to listen and obey him.

If the Christmas story teaches us anything, it is that God often chooses to hide the greatest of gifts in the poorest of packages. He wrapped his own Son in a manger.

Listen to the apostle Paul's words, from Philippians 2:3-11:

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, {and} being made in the likeness of men.

And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (NASB)

Jesus descended from the peak of glory to that lowly position that he might raise us from our lowly position to his glory. He endured a human birth to give us a new, spiritual birth. He occupied a stable that we might occupy a mansion. He had an earthly mother so that we might have a Heavenly Father. He became a servant that we might be free. He left his glory to give us glory. He became poor that we might be rich. He was welcomed by shepherds at his birth so that we might be welcomed by angels at ours. He was hunted by Herod that we might be delivered from the grasp of Satan. That is the great paradox of the Christmas story: the reversal of roles at God's cost, for our benefit.

It is no wonder that the tradition of giving gifts is followed in celebrating the birth of Jesus.

Let me share with you a true story. Mike was a guy who hated Christmas. Oh, he didn't hate the true meaning of Christmas, but rather the commercial aspects of it: the overspending, the frantic running around at the last minute to get a tie for Uncle Harry or dusting powder for grandma, gifts given in desperation because he couldn't think of anything else. He hated that. His wife, knowing he felt this way, decided one Christmas to bypass the usual shirts, sweaters and ties and reach for something special just for Mike.

She got the inspiration in an unusual way. Their son Kevin was twelve at the time and he was on the wrestling team at school. Shortly before Christmas, they had a non-league wrestling match against a team sponsored by an inner-city church. These students were dressed in uniforms made up of ill-fitting boxer shorts, hole-punctured T-shirts and tennis shoes so ragged that the shoestrings seemed to hold them together. It was a lot different from her son's teams. They were dressed in their spiffy blue and gold uniforms and sparkling new wrestling shoes. As the match began, she was alarmed to see that the other team members were wrestling without head gear, a light helmet designed to protect a wrestler's ears. It was a luxury that the rag-tag team could not afford.

Well, her son's team ended up destroying the other team at every weight class. Her husband sighed and shook his head. "I just wish one of them could have won," he said. "They have a lot of potential, but losing like this could take the heart right out of those kids." He loved kids, having coached Little League for years.

That's when the idea of the present came to her.

That afternoon, she went to a local sporting goods store and bought an assortment of wrestling head gear and shoes and sent them anonymously to the inner-city church. On Christmas Eve, she placed an envelope on the Christmas tree, with a note inside telling Mike what she had done and saying that this was his gift from her. She said that his smile was the brightest thing about Christmas that year. It was in succeeding years, too, for each Christmas she followed the tradition. One year, she sent a group of retarded youngsters to a hockey game. Another time, she sent a check to a pair of elderly brothers whose home had burned to the ground a week before Christmas. The envelope became the highlight of their Christmas. It was always the last thing opened on Christmas morning, and their best moment.

And the story doesn't end there.

Mike's wife writes: "For you see, we lost Mike last year to dreaded cancer. When Christmas rolled around, I was still so wrapped in grief I barely got the tree up. Christmas Eve found me placing the envelope on the tree nevertheless, and next morning it was joined by three others. Each of our children, unbeknownst to the others, had placed an envelope on the tree for their Dad. The tradition has grown, and some day will expand even further when our grandchildren, standing around the tree with wide-eyed anticipation, will watch as their fathers take down the envelope. Mike's spirit, like the Christmas spirit, will always be with us."

Because giving is the essence of the Christmas message, Paul's application as to how we might have the attitude of Jesus in coming to earth is put simply in these words from verse 3 of our text:

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but

with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

Let me suggest some gifts that may have been left off your list:

- Mend a quarrel
- Write a long overdue love note
- Forgive an enemy
- Be gentle and patient with someone who is angry
- Listen
- Speak kindly to a stranger
- Enter into another's sorrow
- Take a walk with a friend
- Lessen your demands on others
- Treat someone to an ice cream cone
- Do the dishes for the family
- Give your teacher a break—be especially cooperative
- Fix breakfast for someone on Saturday morning
- Give a soft answer even though you feel strongly.

Let's make Christmas one long extended gift of ourselves to others. Unselfishly. Without announcement. Or obligation. Or reservation. That is Christianity, isn't it?

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