

Foreword

THIS ENGAGING BOOK GOT ITS START IN AN IMPROBABLE setting. Two Presbyterian pastors, man and wife, were in a restaurant having an evening meal of Pad Thai. It was two days after Christmas in 2007. They were unhappily recovering from a severe holiday hangover induced by a month of consumer binging on Christmas presents, a consumer wasteland. On the spot, they decided they didn't want to live this way any longer and set 2008 as a year of intentional living. They had three days to prepare themselves. This is the story of that year. It is a story honestly and modestly told—no apocalyptic ranting, no preaching, no pontificating. And very much a *story*—the detailed account, with insight and humor, of a suburban family with two pre-teenage daughters negotiating a way of life through the maze of American consumerism.

Albert Borgmann writes convincingly of the necessity, if we are not going to be ruined by living in a consumerist culture, of developing what he calls “focal practices”—practices that keep our lives attentive and present and participating in what is immediate and personal. Craig and Nancy Goodwin with their daughters are providing the rest of us with an unpretentious witness to just what is involved in focal practices.

The embracing context for this story as it is told here is the Word that became flesh, moved into our neighborhood—think of it, our very backyards!—and revealed God to us. Care of creation (environmentalism) is fundamentally about this incarnation, the core doctrine of the Christian faith, God with us in the Jesus of history.

But this is hard to take in. *Year of Plenty* goes a long way to help us take it in. We keep wanting to spiritualize Jesus, but our four gospel writers vehemently insist that Jesus was human, *very* human, the same kind of human as you, as me. He walked the paths and roads in first century Palestine just as I walk on sidewalks and trails in twenty-first century America. Jesus spent nine months in the womb just as I did. He was born of a woman just as I was. There was a family. There are named friends. There was work to do, carpentry and masonry and fishing. Meals were eaten. Prayers were prayed. He went in and out of houses and synagogues and the temple, just as we do in houses and schools and Wal-Mart's and churches. He died and was buried, just as we will and will be.

This takes a great deal of the guesswork out of knowing God. Do you want to know what God is like, the form in which God reveals himself? Look in the mirror, look at your friends, look at your spouse. Start here: a human being with eyes and ears, hands and feet, an appetite and curiosity, eating meals with family and friends, walking to the store for a bottle of milk, hiking in the hills picking wildflowers, catching fish and cooking them on a beach for breakfast with your children.

Four writers were assigned by God's Holy Spirit the task of writing down the story of this God-with-us Jesus who lived in first century Palestine. They all write essentially the same story but with variations. But the one thing that they are totally agreed upon is that this Jesus, this God-revealing Jesus, was an actual, human person who lived his life in the identical conditions in which we live ours. No special effects, no dazzling angelic interventions, no levitations. Simple and thoroughly feet-on-the-ground ordinary. There was a brief moment one night in a boat caught in a storm on Lake Galilee, it lasted maybe ten seconds at the most, when his friends thought he was a ghost, but they quickly realized that they were wrong. There was a later occasion three days after they had watched him die on a cross when they again thought Jesus was a ghost.

Wrong again. There was no question. Jesus was totally human, just like them.

In another New Testament piece of writing, the Letter to the Hebrews, this thoroughly human Jesus is affirmed but with one exception: he was “without sin.” Otherwise he lived and experienced it all, everything that goes into the human condition—weakness, limitations, temptations, suffering, celebration, outrage, hunger, thirst, sorrow, birth, death—the works.

What this means, and it is the task of the Christian community to insist on this, is that Jesus is not a principle or an idea or a truth—nothing abstract, nothing in general, nothing impersonal, nothing grandiose. When God revealed himself definitively he did it in a human body, an incarnation.

There is, of course, more to it than this. Jesus is not *just* human; he is also divine. Not only very human but very God. But what we have to face first of all, and what the Gospel writers do face, is that the divinity does not diminish so much as by a fingernail, doesn't dilute even by as much as a teardrop, the humanity. There is this holy mystery: Jesus at the same time that he is fully human with and for us is also God fully present to us, breathing the very Holy Spirit of God into us, enacting salvation and eternal life in us. But first of all—our four Gospel writers are emphatic in their witness—we are told in no uncertain terms that God became flesh, the human flesh of Jesus, and lived among us. We start with the human. This is the way God makes himself known to us.

One would think that this would be enthusiastically embraced as good news—unqualified good news. The surprise is that it is not. When it comes right down to it, I would rather become godlike than that God become like me. It turns out that a lot of us, more times than we like to admit it, aren't all that excited that a very human Jesus is revealing God to us. We have our own ideas of what we want God to be like. We keep looking around for a style of so-called spirituality that gives some promise that we can be godlike,

be in control of our lives and the lives of others, exercise godlike authority or at least be authorities on God. Contemporary technology and the consumerism that develops out of it seem to promise something godlike.

When the know-it-all serpent promised our first parents that they could be “like God” we can be sure that they were not thinking of anything as ordinary as being human with all the limitations of being human. They were thinking of something far grander—knowing everything there is to know and getting an edge on the rest of the creation. When they heard those words from the serpent, “like God,” we can easily imagine what went on in their heads: power, control, being in charge of everything, knowing everything, getting their own way, indulging every whim, able to do anything they desired without restriction.

The usual way we try to become like God is to first eliminate the God who reveals himself in human form and re-imagine God as the god I want to be, then invest this re-imagined god with our own god-fantasies and take charge of the god-business.

The old term for this re-imagined, replacement god is idolatry. It is without question the most popular religion in town—any town—and it always has been. In previous generations these idolatry gods were made of wood and stone, of gold and silver. The replacement god most in evidence in our generation is consumerism.

Year of Plenty is a gentle but insistent exposé of this consumerist replacement god. It is also a convincing witness to the sanctity of the everyday, the ordinary, the things we eat and clothes we wear, the names of our neighbors and the money we spend, which is to say, Jesus in our neighborhood.

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