

**“Far from Home”**

**Christmas Eve, 2017**

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Have you ever been alone on Christmas? Have you ever woken up on Christmas morning by yourself? When I was a senior in Seminary, I was living in New Jersey and working at Westminster Choir College and things worked out that year that I could not get a flight home until around 10:00 on Christmas morning. That meant that Christmas eve I would be by myself. The campus was empty, students and friends were all at their own homes, and I had to get up early to get to the airport. Christmas Eve was sort of depressing that year. So I sat in my little apartment, couldn't sleep and so I decided to watch TV. Of course, being Christmas Eve, there was limited choice for what to watch, but channel 5 out of New York was showing “It's a Wonderful Life.” Now it may be strange to think about it now, but I was 25 years old, and I had never seen that movie, so I decided to watch it. Bad mistake. When George Bailey is running through town having lost everything because he's seeing what life would be like without him, having no family, no home, no one who knows or cares about him, well, the waterworks started. But of course, it ends happily, as I knew my Christmas would also. Because I was going home. So I got up early Christmas morning and headed out for Newark Airport. I was ready for the emptiness of an airport on Christmas day, or at least that's what I thought. But to my surprise the airport was packed. There were crowds of people flying out on Christmas morning. How nuts was that? Especially there were people crowding the plane that I was on, flying to Colorado for the holiday, I assume to ski. I couldn't help but think to myself that they were crazy. Unlike me, they were doing this on purpose. I wanted to yell at them, “Go home! You're supposed to be home on Christmas morning, not standing in line at the airport!”

As I flew home, I started to reflect on how crazy I thought this was, to be far from home on Christmas. Who would do that? Of course, it occurred even to me, that was the exact case for Mary and Joseph. How lonely they must have felt as they traveled the miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. That was not their choice, but the imposition of the government—go, leave your home, go back to your ancestral town and get counted. So we can tax you better. So when Christmas came, when that child was born, they were far from home. Maybe it wasn't so strange being away from home for Christmas. Then I began to think about Jesus himself. Isn't this the very miracle of the incarnation, that idea that we celebrate tonight, that God became one of us? That he left heaven, if we want to call it that and came down. How far from home was he? And he did that on purpose too! Imagine what that must have been like. The Episcopal priest and preach Barbara Brown Taylor imagines what it much have been like for God. Why did he do this? Let himself be born as a human being.

He did it because it seems that human beings had forgotten all about him. They called themselves “self-made” men and women, as if that were something to be proud of. They honestly believed they had created themselves, and they like the result so much that they divided themselves into groups of people who looked, thought, and talked alike. Those who still believed in God drew pictures of him that looked just like them and that made it easier to turn away from the people who were different. This got them into all kinds of trouble. God would have put a stop to it all right there, except for one thing. When he had made human beings, he had made them free. That was built into them just like their hearts and brains were, and even God could not take it back. God shouted to them from the sidelines using every means he could think of, including floods, famines, messengers and manna. He got inside people's dreams, and if that did not work, he woke them up in the middle of the night with his whispering. No matter

what he tried, however, he came up against the barriers of flesh and blood. They were made of it and he was not, which made translation difficult. God would say, “Please stop before you destroy yourselves!” but all they could hear was thunder. God would say, “I love you as much now as the day I made you,” but all they could hear was a loon calling across the water.

Babies were the exception to this sad state of affairs. While their parents were all but deaf to God's messages, babies did not have any trouble hearing him at all. They were all the time laughing at God's jokes or crying with him when he cried, which went right over their parents' heads. Babies did not go to war. They never made hate speeches or littered or refused to play with each other because they belonged to different political parties. They depended on other people for everything necessary to their lives and a phrase like “self-made babies” would have made them laugh until their bellies hurt. While no one asked their opinions about anything that mattered (which would have been a smart thing to do), almost everyone loved them, and that gave God an idea.

Why not create himself as one of these delightful creatures?

He tried the idea out on his cabinet of archangels and at first they were all very quiet. Finally the senior archangel stepped forward to speak for all of them. He told God how much they would worry about him, if he did that. He would be putting himself at the mercy of his creatures, the angel said. People could do anything they wanted to him and if he seriously meant to become one of them there would be no escape if things turned sour. Could he at least create himself as a magical baby with special powers? It would not take much—just the power to become invisible, or the power to hurl bolts of lightning if the need arose. The baby idea was a stroke of genius, the angel said, it really was, but it lacked the adequate safety features.

God thanked the angels for their concern but said no, he thought he would just be a regular baby. How else could he gain the trust of his creatures? How else could he persuade them that he knew their lives inside out, unless he lived one like theirs? There was a risk, he knew that, but that was part of what he wanted his creatures to know: that he was willing to risk everything to get close to them, in hopes that they might love him again.

So God turned and left the cabinet chamber, shedding his robes as he went. The angels watched as his midnight blue mantle fell to the floor, so that all the stars on it collapsed in a heap. Then a strange thing happened. Where the robes had fallen, the floor melted and opened up to reveal a scrubby brown pasture speckled with sheep and—right in the middle of them—a bunch of shepherds sitting around a campfire. It was hard to say who was more startled, the shepherds or the angels, but as the shepherds looked up at them, the angels pushed their senior member to the edge of the hole. Looking down at the poor human beings who were all trying to hide behind each other (poor things, no wings), the angel said in as gentle a voice as he could muster, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of a great joy for all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David a savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

And away up the hill, from the direction of the town, came the sound of a newborn baby’s cry. Far from home.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Bread of Angels: God’s Daring Plan*. Pp. 33-35.