

In a Peanuts cartoon, Linus tells Charlie Brown, "When I hear those coyotes howling at night, it totally depresses me. I start to feel lonely ... Then I get scared." Charlie Brown says, "I thought holding onto that blanket made you secure." Linus replies, "I think the warranty has run out."

The antidote to our fears is found in the coming of Christ into the world. The first words of Adam are "I was afraid." But the first words at the birth of Jesus are, "Don't be afraid."

On this solemn night a television program comes to mind called "This Old House." In this program, people find an old and deteriorating house and produce a terrific renovation. This popular series gave birth to a number of spin-offs.

Sometimes neighbors or friends take over a person's home and renovate one area as they see fit. It is always interesting to see the owners return, look at the changed area and try to keep from showing their honest reaction.

In the original program, "This Old House," artisans bring their skill, work and care to bring out the original beauty of the home they're working on if not to actually enhance it.

Isn't that what the Incarnation, God's becoming man, is all about? God saw the human being He had created with such dignity and majesty in His own image *disfigured, distorted, degraded by sin*.

God became flesh to reverse the process, to repair, renovate and rebuild what sin had destroyed. Christmas, with all of its beauty and majesty, celebrates not only the miraculous events in Bethlehem 2000 years ago but also carries a promise of *what can happen to us*.

Maybe our life has become like one of the homes in "This Old House." It has seen decline and deterioration. Christ came to rebuild and restore us. God did so not that we deserved it, but because of God's mercy.

A Fr. Dominic writes that, "Mercy is the form love takes when it encounters misery. It is first of all a form of love because it wants what is good for the one who is loved. Mercy is *not* condescension. Instead it is a kind of restoration."

Christmas carries the promise to us that new life, a different life, is always within our grasp if we are willing to reach out and receive it. Christmas means that our past does not have to be our future.

Christmas means that God endowed our life with a purpose and reason for being here. Christmas means that we can know forgiveness and union with God, a presence deeper and greater than the other forces around us.

All this is not in some far-off future but is *possible* for us now. When will this *restored creation* take full and final hold in our world? We don't know. *But we do know* that it can begin to take root in our heart, *our life today*.

The sign mentioned by the angels to the shepherds is not that the baby would be in swaddling clothes. They did that to all babies then and still do today.

Babies are bundled to preserve body heat and keep them from rolling around. It was not the swaddling clothes but the manger that was the sign. Lots of babies were wrapped in swaddling clothes but only one was put in a manger.

Some new translations have translated the word "manger" as "feedbox". Although some people don't like that translation, one reason for the change is that maybe we have *domesticated* the manger too much and have forgotten *how crude* the stable was.

The manger was a feedbox. It is difficult to find poetry in the word "feedbox". It is more melodious to sing "away in a *manger*" than "away in a *feedbox*".

It is God who is laid in the manger. This divine act of humility prompted Saint Bernard to ask, "Lord, what made you so small?" And his ecstatic response was, "It was love!" The angels said to the shepherds, "We bring you good news!" What is the good news? Saint John puts it succinctly in his marvelous formula: "*The Word was made flesh.*" The Word that created the world takes on the world.

Thomas Keating wrote that in becoming a member of the human family, Christ became every man and every woman. In joining the human family to himself, he has taken every member to himself. The whole creation has become his body. The divine energy of the God-man is directed to one thing: to win our love.

Now God has become one of us and is breathing our air. In Jesus, his heart is beating; his eyes are seeing; his hands are touching; his ears are hearing. By becoming a human being, he is in the heart of all creation and in every part of it, but in some mysterious way contains him. *Now Jesus can say that whatever is done to the least of his little ones is done to him.*

Every human person, by virtue of the Incarnation, is Christ. Everything in creation has been transformed by contact with his humanity. He gives himself to us in everything that happens. "*The Word was made flesh*" made a part of creation, made matter-" *and dwells among us.*"

Jesus is trying to give himself to us in every experience. Just as Jesus *transformed* that stable into a place of light, peace and hope, Jesus can do the same *in our lives*. He can turn the old house our life may have become into a beautiful spiritual structure. He can transform the disrepair, damage and deterioration of our life into something beautiful.

That is the promise of the manger scene. This is the promise of the first Christmas, of every Christmas and of this Christmas. God becomes flesh, but through it God awakens us to the divine life in us. We are not only human beings; we are divinely human beings. We are His *beloved*.