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Jesus, Friend and Companion

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Grace Episcopal Church, Elmira, NY

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Amos 8:1-12; Psalm 52; Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

Through Jesus Christ our invisible God becomes visible. The miracle of the Incarnation brings God into a finite, human tangible state. Jesus is God, but also a human being. He was born and died, ate food, got tired (and probably cranky). He had special friends like Peter, James, John, Mary of Magdala, and the family in Bethany. He was just as real as any one of us.

Yet he was also God. Paul says, “In him all things in heaven and on earth were created. ... He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” He existed before the world began and will continue to exist long after our world, as we know it, has disappeared.

How can we reconcile this overwhelming omnipotent vastness with the baby in the manger or the friend of Mary and Martha? This was a major puzzle for the early Christians. There were many theories, many arguments, even bloodshed (because they took their theology very seriously in those days). The arguments were not resolved until the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451. This declares that Jesus Christ is “at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood” and that these natures exist “without confusion, without change, without division, [and] without separation.”¹ The paradox is impossible to resolve logically. Jesus is both God, omnipotent, omnipresent and inscrutable, and at the same time, a man, a friend, a companion.

I will share a little of my story of coming to know Jesus as a personal friend. After many years traveling spiritual, but not Christian paths, my theology professor in seminary said that I had a very strong concept of God but didn't know much about Jesus. So in my senior year I made the Ignatian Exercises. The heart of this work is to imagine yourself as participating in various passages from the Gospels. I experienced a series of very powerful images as I allowed my imagination to place me in these stories as a participant.

In the passage from Luke about the birth of Jesus, I wrote “I am a small street urchin, maybe five years old, barefoot and cold, standing on the stones of the stable yard. I could smell the animals and hear Mary's cries in labor. Then the baby cried and I crept forward. Jesus was in Mary's arms and he looked at me. All knowledge, all wisdom was present in those eyes and his love for me poured into my heart.”²

Over successive stories I became a member of the family, Jesus' big sister. Mary was my adopted mother, and Joseph my father. In one scenario, “Mary washes my dirty face; her touch is so light and gentle – she kisses me and gives me a hug. Joseph lets me help him, makes me feel really valuable. We go off to work together, just the two of us; Mary has packed a lunch for us. I feel accepted and loved completely. I don't have to be smart or pretty; I am loved because I am me. I play with Jesus on the floor – I love him so much, I can feel it in my heart. He looks at me with his big, penetrating eyes, and I can feel his love for me.”

¹ Book of Common Prayer, p. 864.

² This quote and the others are from my personal journal kept during the 19th Annotation of the Ignatian Exercises at Mercy Prayer Center, Sept 2002 – May 2003.

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Another day in Nazareth, “I am looking after Jesus. We go play in the creek, splashing each other and getting all wet. Jesus is full of energy, leaping and jumping around. We find pretty stones and rush back to show them to Mary. Jesus, all wet, climbs into her lap. Joseph picks me up and holds me. His loving touch is so comforting.”

These and other stories helped me experience family life in a more loving and healthy way than my own growing up. My family wasn't awful at all; there was much about it that was very good, but it was sort of averagely dysfunctional. These weeks I spent as a child with Jesus, Mary and Joseph were tremendously healing. I felt so loved and comforted that I was able to forgive and let go of a lot of unhappiness from my childhood.

As Jesus grew up and began his ministry after his baptism, I traveled with the other disciples who followed him. At the Transfiguration: “I feel the hard stones under my feet and the wind blowing in my face as I climb the mountain with Jesus. I am scared, I don't understand but know that this is important. As Jesus starts to glow and the other figures appear, I am filled with love for him. But when the voice speaks from the cloud, I become aware of his otherness; Jesus is not like me, he is something else too. I am scared but I cannot leave; I must stay, even when he says he will die. Part of me wants to run away, but I am irresistibly drawn to him, fascinated by the tremendous mystery that has been revealed.”

“After the Transfiguration we are walking along the road on our way to another town. I tell Jesus how I feel, loving but a little scared. He puts his arm around me and tells me that he is always with me and I with him. He is showing the way. Each of us must travel this path in our own way. He says, ‘I have come to show you how.’”

I continue to travel with Jesus, gradually coming to understand on a much deeper level what his ministry means to us. I say to him, “Dear Jesus, the concept of trying to be like you, to emulate you is new to me. You are God, it never occurred to me that I could be like you, or should try to be. But I see it now – you were all the time setting us an example.’ He says, ‘This is the last step of pulling yourself out of your world into mine. As you are willing to give up all parts of yourself, even your identity, you will move closer and closer to me.’ He reaches out and takes me in his arms. ‘It is here, in my heart that you will become most completely yourself.’ I ask, ‘Dear Jesus, how?’ ‘By letting me have you – all of you. Hold nothing back. Allow yourself to be completely absorbed in my love.’ The sacred heart of Jesus opens, and I fall in and drown.”

I have shared some intensely personal and intimate stories. This is only one person's experience. The great miracle of the incarnation is that unknowable God becomes human, one of us, accessible. Coming to know Jesus, each in our own, unique way, is a very personal experience. This takes time. Read the Gospels. Like the story today, seat yourself at Jesus' feet and allow the story to unfold. Hear Martha in the kitchen banging pots and getting angry – but you just can't leave him. Be there, sitting quietly at his feet, completely enveloped in his love. Be there, be with Jesus; allow him to fill your heart, your mind, your very being. He will – if you let him.