

I think I've turned into a Christmas Grinch. Yeah, it might not be good form for a pastor to admit this openly. This year I've struggled more than most wondering why in the world do we bother with this stressful, emotional, and exhausting month.

In the midst of that feeling last Sunday I sat and watched Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. Seeing this show has been a family tradition almost every year. This year there was grumbling in our family about why we bother seeing the same show every year. Some said, "The story doesn't change." Others said, "the actors never seem to change either." Yet another said, "the set looks like last year's." So, why bother going?

Here we are on Christmas Eve – same readings, basically the same music – so why bother coming here once a year, at night, with candlelight, and readings from an old book we call the Bible. Why bother?

On the surface it might be to appease a family member, or to call to mind a loved one that died, to get in the Christmas spirit, or maybe

because it's tradition. And I get that. I've sat in pews at this point in the service waiting for the pastor to be quiet so we can move on with the evening and get to the presents – I get it.

So why bother?

Why bother gathering to talk about God's incarnation, God becoming human, over 2,000 years ago? What does the incarnation mean in 2015 on a relatively warm, snow-less Christmas in Chicago?

I don't pretend to have an easy answer for you– after all being Christian isn't about the easy answers. What I do know is that life is messy. Addiction. Death. Lies. Secrets. Family dynamics.

Abandonment. Terrorist attacks. Missed opportunities. Disaster. Arguments. Life is messy, *and* incarnation is messy. One scholar notes that, incarnation messes up the tidy lines and categories, including those of divine and human. God's presence coming to us in a baby keeps us always guessing and watching carefully. What is divine? What is human? Where is the distinction? It also keeps us from quickly discounting things and people – even when we

discount people and their agency in the name of charity! The messy incarnation reminds us to stop expecting or endorsing some unattainable 'perfection,' in ourselves or in others.¹ You see, by simply taking on human form everything becomes messy. It becomes messy, because we humans are complicated and difficult to understand and define. We do things that are incongruent, out of character, and flat out cryptic. Being human is mysterious at times, and the incarnation is also full of mystery. So perhaps we gather here each year to live in the awe and mystery of God's presence in a messy world. Maybe we gather here each year to hold on to our messiness, own it, and then experience God's presence in it.

While I sat at *A Christmas Carol* with my family and my boyfriend, I was reminded that relationships are messy. However, in a world torn apart by war and gun violence; in a world where Professor Hawkins is suspended from Wheaton College because of her

¹ <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Why-the-Incarnation-Matters?offset=2&max=1#JeneeWoodard>

professed solidarity with our Muslim brothers and sisters;² in a world where miscommunications and misinterpretations turn into missed opportunities and misunderstanding. In the midst of all that happens in this world, perhaps just being with one another in the midst of the messiness is a true expression of the incarnation.

Simply sitting next to those I love, and with whom I often disagree, might just be the advent of God's incarnation in my life. There sitting in that place is love, grace, and truth in a messy world. And could it be that our solidarity is the continued incarnation of our God?

This week I heard one of my favorite Christmas time songs, "So This Is Christmas" by John Lennon. The song starts with, (and sing it with me if you'd like) "So this is Christmas, and what have you done?

Another year over, and a new one just begun."³ The beginning of the song always gets me reflecting on another year gone by.

Similarly, after I finished watching *A Christmas Carol* I realized the way I engaged with the story was different than in years past. I

² <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/breaking/ct-wheaton-college-professor-larycia-hawkins-20151216-story.html>

³ <http://www.metrolyrics.com/so-this-is-christmas-lyrics-john-lennon.html>

found myself thinking about my life, thinking of what my year looked like, I found myself relating to the characters – even Scrooge, and I found myself shaped in new ways, even if it was the same story, the same people, and the same set.

So too my prayer tonight is that as you engage with the Christmas story in a new way. I hope you sit here in the candlelight with a lot of the same things as last year – the readings, the songs, and the candles - but this year I hope you engage as a different person. With Christmas Day so close, take a deep breath and wonder - wonder “how have you been incarnated by God this year?” Think about “How you engaged others, yourself, and God?” Then pause and be reminded of our God – a God who comes to us in the messiness of life. Be reminded of Immanuel, God with us. Remember that God is with you, with us, and notice God’s solidarity in the messiness. Notice that not even the messiness of humanity can separate us from God. So sure, same story, same night, nothing new; but then ask yourself: why bother? Amen.