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God Among Us

John 1:14

Some of you may have heard me tell the story of a Christmas pageant that went terribly wrong. Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus were to be surrounded by twenty angels who were all portrayed by girls and fifteen shepherds who were all boys. There was limited space on the stage and it required careful planning to find everyone a place to stand. To solve this problem chalk marks were made on the stage floor to indicate where everyone was to stand. There was a circle for each angel and a cross for each shepherd. But, when the marking was done a serious error was made. The circles and crosses were drawn at a rehearsal where children were wearing ordinary clothes rather than costumes.

When the pageant began everything ran smoothly. Mary, Joseph, and the Christ child found their places with no problem. As the angels came in they were able to locate their circles and get into position with very little difficulty. But when the shepherds arrived chaos ensued. The long billowing robes of the angels covered not only their circles but also the crosses where the shepherds were supposed to stand. Finally one little boy had all that he could take. He turned to the teacher who was going quietly mad off stage. In a voice loud enough for all to hear he said, "These damned angels are fouling up the whole show(William Muehl, All the Damned Angels, pages 12-13)!"

That is a statement that expresses in a very profound way the ambiguity of human life. There is a sense in which we are all damned angels who keep fouling up the show. Our most precious goals and aspirations in life keep running afoul of our all too human limitations. The challenge of being human is learning to live with this ambiguity.

In the first chapter of John's gospel the ambiguity of human life is addressed in a very direct way. There we read, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us(John 1:14)." To take these words seriously means to affirm that God chose to become one of the "damned angels." God choose to embrace the ambiguity of human life.

We can learn a lot about the ambiguity of life from our Christmas celebrations. Presbyterian pastor John Buchanan has described how he and his wife tried to shield their young children from the excesses of the materialistic holiday that Christmas has become in our culture. They wanted their children to understand that Christmas was

about the birth of Jesus and the coming of God's love. They tried their best to teach them that it was not about Rudolph, Frosty, or a gift laden Santa Claus.

Buchanan now admits that they failed miserably. They could not eliminate the ambiguity that comes from mixing the sacred and the profane. He writes:

After all, incarnation means that this world is God's creation and that God loved it so much that God came here to be with us. The story could not be more this-worldly; pregnant unwed teenager, perplexed fiancé, arduous journey, inn full of raucous guests, barn full of animals, labor, pain, blood, birth and shepherds. It could not be more human or more earthy, and that is the point ... It is this world that God entered on that first Christmas and enters again and again(Christian Century, December 13, 2011, page 3).