

Mixed Messages

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If visitors from another world were to speculate on what the message and meaning of Christmas is, simply by observing our contemporary culture, imagine what they would think. "Christmas is about....*buying* stuff - *lots* of stuff!" After all, that message has been broadcast far and wide since the day after Halloween. And even though that blatant message of materialism may bother us, there's still a kernel of truth in it: Christmas *is* about generously giving, and graciously receiving. Another message that E.T. might pick up from our culture, is that Christmas is a time to *connect* with family and friends - whether that be by exchanging those beautiful cards, or those highly-informative Christmas letters; or by traveling the highways or skyways in order to be home for the holidays. And while this may not be the essence of Christmas' message or meaning, reaching out to loved ones with warm wishes and good cheer, is certainly a part of it.

Now of course any extraterrestrial beings clever enough to master warp speed, would probably be smart enough to examine our *Christian* culture if they were curious about the meaning of *Christmas*. However, even within our churches, there are a wide variety of messages that are highlighted at this time of year. Many emphasize Peace on Earth and Goodwill to *All*; while others seem to proclaim a restrictive message of exclusive Christian Correctness. For some, insistence on a virgin miraculously conceiving, and the pinpoint GPS properties of a Bethlehem Star, are crucial to Christmas' true meaning; while others seem to find the inexplicable Divine Mystery, or the vulnerable faithfulness of Mary and Joseph, far more inspiring.

With all these respective Christmas messages swirling around like visions of dancing sugarplum [*another* Christmas image], it might prove difficult for our unidentified flying friends to identify the essential Christmas Message. But, you know, that might not be a bad thing. Perhaps, the true meaning of Christmas is that the Divine Desire to connect with this world is so profound and amazing, that it cannot be contained in one event, nor constrained by one definitive message. The Divine Involvement in the Human Story - with its ups and downs, twists and turns, tragedies and triumphs - requires much more than a simple, easily observable explanation. So, maybe the *main* message of Christmas - with its many-faceted features and themes - is to steadfastly remind us and assure us, that God *is with us!* And unlike

some kind of otherworldly observer, this Divine Presence is intricately and intimately concerned and connected with the well-being of this entire Creation.

God is with us, as we joyfully offer our gifts to others, and gratefully receive theirs. God is with us as we sit with family and friends, or as we sit in crowded airports or congested traffic. Whenever you or I advocate for peace on earth and justice for all, God is with us! In the miracle of *every* birth, and in the faithfulness of all loving parents, God is with us! Even in our darkest nights of pain and sorrow, you and I are not alone, for God *is* with us! The all-important message and meaning of Christmas, is that the Holy One is present in the most unlikely places and people that you or I could possibly imagine: From a tiny baby in a manger, to a traveling teacher in Judea, to a blood-stained cross on the outskirts of Jerusalem - the Divine Source of Life is fully present - to encourage, to comfort, to forgive, and ultimately to bring-forth New Life and Renewed Hope.

There's an old saying on this planet: "A picture is worth a thousand words." In other words, seeing something for ourselves, makes it far more real and meaningful than simply having it described to us. In the person of Jesus Christ, the Magnificence of Divine Compassion and Grace takes on human flesh, in order to touch and to *be* touched; to console and to be consoled; to welcome and to lift-up all those who are hurting, lonely, or lost. Those people who know Jesus personally, see in him the fulness of Divine acceptance and love. And somehow, knowing Jesus makes them realize that God is truly with *them*, no matter what happens in their lives. Jesus unwavering friendship inspires his followers to live as genuine children of God - trusting that there is nothing in life or death, that can ever overpower the Divine Power of Holy Love that resides among us.

So, if I had to explain to E.T what the meaning and message of Christmas is, I'd use one word: *Emmanuel*, which means "God is with us!" I'd also say that *because* God is with us, in all times and places, that the Divine Presence is also present in all of Life. And at Christmas we celebrate the fundamental fact that there is nothing, or no one, beyond the touch of the Holy - the One whose coming among us bridges the perceived gaps between heaven and earth, sacred and secular, sinner and saint.

On this Holy Night, you and I gather to celebrate the greatest gift of all: the Holy Presence in human form - not just in the person and life of Jesus, but

in every person and in all of Life. And since God comes to us not only in grand and glorious ways, but also in ways that are humble and small, you and I really need to pay attention! We must keep our eyes and ears open for those little and quiet signs of the Divine Presence among us: the smile of a baby; the joy of a child; the encouraging words of a friend; and those surprising acts of kindness from a stranger. In all these things, you and I are reminded that Divine Love and Grace often comes to us in ways which we would not expect or anticipate. However, it *does* come! And *that's* the message and meaning Christmas: God is with us, God is with us indeed!