

*Meditation*

Text: Luke 2:14

*“Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”*

Luke 2:14

Perhaps the best writer the Christian Reformed community has ever produced is Peter DeVries. I enjoy his novels partly because so much of what he writes from his life reminds me of my life. But Peter DeVries’s life was much darker than mine; his was too familiar with disease and death. We see that clearly in his book *The Blood of the Lamb*. *The Blood of the Lamb* is really about the life of Peter DeVries, even though the character’s name is not DeVries; it is Wanderhope, Don Wanderhope, from the Dutch word *wanhoop*, which means “despair.” And there is plenty for Don Wanderhope to despair over — his childhood tuberculosis, his struggle with faith, and the deaths over the years of his brother, wife, and daughter — all of it from the real life of Peter DeVries. Early in the book, when his brother dies young, Don turns to heaven and asks, “Why don’t you pick on somebody your own size?”

That’s a question that’s been near us this Advent season, as we’ve considered harder depictions of God than we prefer: as we’ve thought about Job devastated, because God is proving something with him; as we’ve seen Abraham taking a knife to the son he’s waited for his whole life, because God is testing him; as we’ve watched the residents of Jerusalem high-railing off to Egypt, back to the land of slavery, because God is angry with them. And as we’ve thought about the troubling, enigmatic God of those stories, we could imagine one of the people involved blurting out, “Why don’t you pick on somebody your *own* size?” Or, at least, why don’t you explain yourself? Why don’t you shed some light on how my suffering or my giving up my son or my seeing my nation destroyed fits into your plan? Why don’t you ask my opinion once in a while? Why *don’t* you pick on somebody your own size?

The texts that we've looked at while waiting for the Messiah this year are difficult texts, texts that raise questions, that make us wonder about getting along in a world with an almighty, eternal God who doesn't let us in on all of his secrets. And — I want to be clear about this — we haven't come up with any answers these last three weeks, not to those questions. And if it seems like we have, then I've misled you. We haven't. Concerning those questions — the questions about why this pain and what God's thinking and where he is exactly — concerning *those* questions what we've learned is not answers but humility. Because we've learned that God is God.

He's not that simple divinity who's more like a pal than a god — someone we call on when we need a hand with a sporting event or a trip or a war, but who doesn't bother us much otherwise. This God is not like that; this God is God. He is silent, he tests, he judges, and he doesn't give us the blueprint to understand it all. As he himself said, he is God and no mortal (Hosea 11:9). And he leaves it to us to trust him — even when we don't know what's going on, even when it all falls apart, even when it's all so hard.

Toward the end of *The Blood of the Lamb*, the leukemia in Don Wanderhope's daughter seems to be in remission, just in time for her birthday, so he buys her a cake. On the way to the hospital, he stops in a nearby church to offer a prayer for her. Just then he's met by one of the nurses who tells him that an infection has caught her. Wanderhope rushes to the hospital only in time to say goodbye. For, at three o'clock, a few minutes after he gets there, Carol dies.

After a few drinks, Don remembers the cake he left on a pew in the church. He gets it and steps out of the sanctuary onto the sidewalk outside. He then notices the statue of Christ on the cross hanging over the entrance to the building. So, afflicted by grief and affected by alcohol, Don Wanderhope takes the cake carefully out of the box, balances it on his hand, and throws it with all of his might in the face of Jesus Christ. A perfect shot, he says, landing just under the crown of thorns. And so, Don lives up to his name — he is in despair over a child's death and a God who will not answer.

I feel for Don Wanderhope; I feel for Peter DeVries. I understand that accusing question, Why don't you pick on somebody your own size? I understand the despair, the anger over great suffering and no answers. But that's not all there is, otherwise cake would be the only response. It's not, because what we know, what we're really singing about today, is that God has answered.

He has answered every claim that he enjoyed the distance between himself and his people, that he is unaffected by their suffering, that he could have prevented it but didn't want to. This is God's answer: a child, an infant, wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. Now he *has* taken on someone his own size — not by turning away from us, but by becoming one of us.

"I am God and no mortal," he declared. Until today. From this day forward, from Christmas Day on, it can never again be said with complete truth that God is God and not a human being. Because the God who is God, the God who is at times silent and testing and judging, that almighty, incomprehensible God has become mortal, has become human. He has taken on bones and parents and vulnerability and troubles and questions of his own.

And that is his answer. That is his answer to Job and Abraham and the people of Jerusalem and Don Wanderhope and every other one who has looked to him from their pain and yearned for a response. This is his answer. It's not an explanation; it's not an apology. And it's not an undoing of the pain or a promise that there will never be another child taken down by leukemia.

And we should say that out loud. There's too much about this holiday that's artificial comfort, sentimentality with no theology. We of all people have to be honest about Christmas and about the difference it makes. We have to admit that the Don Wanderhopes exist and that sometimes our suffering is a lot like theirs, and our reaction also might be to heave pastry and faith together in the face of God. Except that we know something: we know that he *hasn't* kept his distance. We know that he *hasn't* left us without a word. In fact, his Word became flesh and lived among us. He has come down to our size.

So there is indeed "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors." Not because we now understand everything that's going on — the diagnoses and the divorces and the deaths — but because God himself has spoken — indelibly, permanently, astoundingly. He didn't explain; maybe he *couldn't* explain, since he is God and we are not. But to bring us peace he did something more than explain it: he participated in it. He took it on himself — the pain, the trials, the judgment for sin. And so he watched his own child die one day at three in the afternoon.

And so the peace we have warrants the voices of angels because it is a peace first of all with God. The God who judges sin placed the weight of that judgment on his own child. The peace we have is genuine peace be-

cause, in spite of the battles and the casualties around us, in spite of the wounds we bear right now, we know that God himself — almighty and mysterious as he is — came down to our size to lessen them and finally to remove them. That's the gift he brings, peace of soul and spirit and faith, because we know that he took our curse upon himself, and we know that, whatever we go through and however alone we feel, the God of the world did not leave us to ourselves but joined us in the place of our suffering. And that night he sent his angels to all of the misfits and the sufferers with one piece of news: "to you is born this day in the City of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." And we say, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, right now, right here, for us whom he has favored — there is peace.



— FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS —

## *Jesus, God with Us*

Text: Matthew 1:18-25

*"... She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.*

Matthew 1:21-25

Well, I'm glad we didn't start here this year — even though every time I can remember that I've read from the Gospel of Matthew for Christmas, this is exactly where I started. Skip all the names; get right to the story. So I don't want to pretend that I've done much differently than most of you on that score; genealogies are not exactly filled with fascinating, helpful material, not at first glance, anyway. And that's why we need to take another glance; that's why, at least every so often, when we do Christmas

from Matthew, we should do it from verse 1 and not verse 18. Because even what we read this morning, even the *story* of Mary and Joseph and Jesus, is not supposed to be read all by itself; Matthew wanted us to read all the names first.

In the names we learn some things, or are reminded of some things, about God. We're reminded that God didn't just get into the Messiah business when Mary met Joseph, or when the Romans took over Judea; he's been aiming for this day all along. For God, according to Matthew, the whole Old Testament takes place in Advent, the whole Old Testament has to do with Christmas. And we're reminded in Matthew's names that this Messiah is a human being in the very line of Abraham and Rahab and Solomon and Joseph himself, but that he's also something new, something very different. In the names we see that, as far as his people may wander from God, he still remembers them. In spite of all they do to cut off the line of David, this God quietly, usually invisibly, keeps it going, keeps it moving toward Christmas, keeps it heading toward the Christ.

And that very God of the Old Testament, and of Matthew's genealogy, is the God of this story of the virgin Mary and Joseph and Jesus. The God who kept moving toward Christmas by arranging impossible births to some woman in her nineties and to a foreigner who's just trying to make sure she and her mother-in-law have enough to eat, and even to a king and another man's wife, that same God is at it again here — stepping in to make sure that the line of David leads to the Christ, his Christ. So now Mary is found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And it's the same Spirit, the same God, that has been at work through all those centuries — watching over the line of David, staying faithful to his promise, bringing to us a Messiah who is from both the man Abraham and the Spirit of God. That's the Messiah Matthew wants you to meet in our passage this morning, the Messiah whom all of history has aimed at, the Messiah who is the result of a promise God refused to let die.

His name is Jesus. Actually, it's *Joshua* — Jesus is the Greek version of the Hebrew name Joshua. It's not a strange name in first-century Judah, not unique. There are other Joshuas running around Nazareth. It's a special name, but it's not a new name, not at all. In fact, Mary and Joseph might have come up with it all on their own.

But that's the thing — Mary and Joseph didn't come up with it. The angel of the Lord came up with it. "You are to name him Jesus," he tells Joseph, "for he will save his people from their sins." There's the difference — every little Joshua or Jesus in Judea is running around with a name that means, in Hebrew, "the Lord saves," "God saves," and in one sense this Je-