



# Christmas and the Reality of Incarnation: *Finitum capax infiniti*

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John 1:1–14, a text proclaimed and preached on Christmas, announces that God becomes flesh and dwells among us. The Lutheran maxim that the finite bears the infinite (*finitum capax infiniti*) is an incarnational and sacramental summary of this good news. Indeed the good news of Christmas is that the Word is born into the flesh of all creation. Through the Word, God creates the world and in the Word all things hold together.<sup>1</sup> The formula *finitum capax infiniti* points not only to God's gracious presence in Jesus Christ, but also in the creation generally.<sup>2</sup> God is present in the creatures of the entire cosmos, in the earthly elements—in the preaching of the Word and the offering of the sacraments. Christmas is an incarnational and sacramental celebration!

<sup>1</sup>John 1; Col 1.

<sup>2</sup>From Martin Luther, "This Is My Body" (1527): "Indeed, he makes and does nothing except through his Word, Genesis 1 and John 1, i.e. his power....Then if his power and Spirit are present everywhere and in all things to the innermost and outermost degree, through and through, as it must be if he is to make and preserve all things everywhere, then his divine right hand, nature, and majesty must also be everywhere. He must be present if he makes and preserves them." *Luther's Works*, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955–) 37:61. Cited hereafter as *LW*.

*Incarnation is anything but neat. In Christ and Christmas, God embraces the messiness of flesh and world, giving us life and calling us to passionate love of God and all that God has made.*

## GOD'S MESSY EMBRACE OF THE FINITE

During Christmas, Christians rejoice that God so loved the whole cosmos, that Infinite Grace embraces the finite. God is universally everywhere in the world, and particularly in the person of Jesus Christ. This is claimed by Christians as good news. I wonder if this is so. In our American culture that is obsessed with purity and perfection, is it really good news that God comes in *our flesh*? In all of its messiness? In our imperfections? In our limitations? Ironically, Christians, who usually are not different from the culture in which they live, try to make this good news something other than it is. We take the genuine messiness and finiteness out of Christmas and dress it up in the artificial veneer of white wings, children's pageants, and Santas at the mall.

Christians seem to believe that the original Christmas setting was "pure" in a sense—Mary dressed in blue, Jesus in clean swaddling clothes, and Joseph standing attentively near. The animals look on adoringly. We long for the same purity in our own Christmas celebrations. We spend hundreds and thousands of dollars to brighten up our dark world and wrap it in tinsel, bows, and packages. We leave the "flesh" out of Christmas, for we are sure that no God would come into this mess of a world, really.

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Might we imagine, however, that the economic realities, political histories, religious struggles, and formidable social boundaries wrapped the package of Christmas in the time of Jesus as they do now? Even Jesus' own personal family and history is hardly "pure" or "virginal." His mother is young, unwed, pregnant, and poor. Jesus' ancestry and lineage is mixed at best. Accused in some accounts of being a bastard child, Jesus' entry into this world is hardly what we would expect of God's only child. The holy family would more likely qualify for food stamps than the cover of a bulletin. Christmas has nothing to do with the drama of the perfect family or the chastity of reproduction. Instead, the Christmas story is a holy narrative about the collective pain of our inescapable mortality, our shared sufferings and joys, and finally about the persistent hope offered through a human being who fully embraces the human condition. That is the good news. On account of Jesus the Christ, the finite bears the infinite.

To help us understand even more what I mean by finite, I will draw first on the work of Donna Haraway, a philosopher of science. Due to her Catholic sacramental background (even though she has left Christianity itself), she uses incarnational categories to flesh out her understanding of the world. As a cultural critic

and student of the sciences, Haraway crosses typical boundaries and imagines new ways of describing nature. She creates metaphors that traverse the relationships between nature, technology, culture, human, animal, and machine. What we tend to separate as dualisms, Haraway fuses together. Her work challenges and confronts our interpretations of the created order.

In her work, Haraway characterizes *flesh* as that which is mixed, messy, hybrid, and mutated. All of life comes with a history—natural, historical, cultural, economic, political. Nothing is a thing unto itself, but all life emerges from the webs of evolutionary relationships. Haraway explains: “For example, a seed contains inside its coat the history of practices such as collecting, breeding, marketing, taxonomizing, biochemically analyzing, advertising, eating, cultivating, harvesting, celebrating, and starving.”<sup>3</sup> Or in the world of biotechnology, Haraway describes the processes related to stem cell research: “I am committed to showing how each of these stem cells is a knot of knowledge—making practices, industry and commerce, popular culture, social struggles, psychoanalytic formulations, bodily histories, human and nonhuman actions, local and global flows, inherited narratives, new stories, syncretic technical/cultural processes and more.”<sup>4</sup> Telling the story of a stem cell or of a seed requires knowing and relating the discourse of layered histories, rich in their local and global connections.

The story of human nature is layers deep and centuries long. We are first and foremost creatures that have emerged over long periods of time, requiring that other species die before us. We didn’t just come about without the world noticing our arrival. Humans are bio-cultural species, related to all other species in the world. We are interrelated webs of the natural world. From Haraway: “Living inside biology is about living inside nature-cultures. It is about being inside history as well as being inside the wonder of the natural complexity.”<sup>5</sup> We emerge from a living history of the natural world.

Haraway rightly notes, however, that often the narratives that hold our worlds together have been told by the rich and powerful, the pure and the perfect. What about the voices that have been left out, displaced, misunderstood? “Anyone who has done historical research knows that the undocumented often have more to say about how the world is put together than do the well pedigreed.”<sup>6</sup> Likewise, when we tell the Christmas story it often reflects the values of those who are the powerful, the perfect, and the pure. Telling the Christian story should not be a tidy process. Margaret Miles, a church historian, explains: “Accountability to historical evidence requires that tidiness and cohesiveness be sacrificed; in return, a vivid scene of the liveliness, conflicts, and excitement of Christian movements

<sup>3</sup>Donna Haraway, *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium. FemaleMan\_Meets\_Oncomouse* (New York/London: Routledge, 1997) 129.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Donna Haraway, *How Like a Leaf: An Interview with Thyrza Nichols Goodeve* (New York/London: Routledge, 2000) 26.

<sup>6</sup>Haraway, *Modest\_Witness*, 88.

emerges.”<sup>7</sup> When we tell the Christmas gospel, Christians are called to relinquish the tidy and cohesive and opt for the liveliness, messiness, and depth that the story bears.

This incarnational love story does not fit with the “Jesus is my boyfriend” theology that permeates so much of our contemporary piety. We become who we are in relationship, deep in the flesh with one another and with all creation. In a contemporary love story written by Jeanette Winterson, the flesh of the main character is explored in all of its untidy details. *Written on the Body* explicates the ways our finite bodies bear the infinite power of love to each other. When the main character is diagnosed with cancer, her lover explains: “Within the clinical language, through the dispassionate view of the sucking, sweating, greedy, defecating self, I found a love-poem to Louise. I would go on knowing her, more intimately than the skin, hair and voice that I craved. I would have her plasma, her spleen, her synovial fluid. I would recognize her even when her body had long since fallen away.”<sup>8</sup> Transformed by the passion of their shared love, the main character is transformed. This tender love story teaches us what we often don’t want to know—that we can’t escape the finite limitations of who we are.

To deny our flesh and its limitations is to deny that which God embodies in the incarnation. It is to deny that we are created. When we deny our finitude we contribute to our culture’s search for perfection and purity. Millions of dollars a year are spent on cosmetic surgery. For some in the medical field, death is seen as failure. Doctors and other health care providers are forced to meet our desires to be fixed so that we can live forever. Legislatures come up with bills that force nutrition and hydration on patients at the end stages of life. We deny we are finite. We just can’t bear that God comes this way—as one who loves the world with all of its impurities and imperfections.

### LIFE AT THE RAGGED EDGE

I currently teach a course for seniors at Augustana College called “Life at the Ragged Edge: Where Religion and Medicine Meet.” Mary Helen Harris, an ER physician and professor of ethics at the University of South Dakota Sanford School of Medicine, and I meet with students once a week to learn about the lives of those who are on the edge, whose flesh is dying or diseased. Our syllabus describes the basics of the course:

The purpose of this class is to examine “local” stories from people’s lives in order to reflect upon what it means to be human in an age of medical science and biotechnology. Religious and spiritual narratives form our personal and corporate identities and help us understand how we can be most fully human in a world shaped by science. We live with new boundaries, in new ways (nature and tech-

<sup>7</sup>Margaret Miles, *The Word Made Flesh: A History of Christian Thought* (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell, 2005) 8.

<sup>8</sup>Jeanette Winterson, *Written on the Body* (New York: Vintage, 1994) 111.

nology, human nature and non-human nature, rich and poor, God and the world). Those boundaries, blurred and crossed, are the ragged edges where we try to make sense of the question: how then shall we live?

To reflect on this question we have read autobiographies, memoirs, and novels and watched films of those people who are truly on the ragged edge of life. What we have found is that most of us at some point have a fear of that ragged edge where we come upon our limits and imperfections. Let me illustrate.

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In a powerful memoir entitled *Raising Lazarus*, Robert Pensack recounts his struggle to survive a hereditary disease of the heart muscle, HCM (hypertrophic cardiomyopathy).<sup>9</sup> Pensack, a psychiatrist, faces not only the struggle against his disease, but also a fight for his sanity. Finally, after surviving a heart transplant, he tries to figure out how to live again in a body that has betrayed him. One of the most powerful personal dilemmas he faces is whether or not to have children, since they would have a good chance of inheriting this disease. This gripping story created engaging discussion in our classroom about the ways our bodies can betray us, of the terrible suffering that illness can cause, and of the emotion and spiritual pain that accompany disease. At points in the story, Pensack’s only hope seems to be in the miracles of modern medicine and technology. And although he does receive a heart transplant and does survive, the most important struggle is how he comes to grips with his own mortality and limitations. In the face of extraordinary hurdles, Pensack helps us to learn that living in the face of death is not just a one-time event, but a process that we all face, and one that shapes all of those we love. His hope in the future lies in his willingness to embrace his death in the present.

In a documentary entitled *Southern Comfort*, we watch a community of people that no one around them seems to understand as they try to find love and companionship. *Southern Comfort* records the lives of several people who are transsexual. Robert, who changes from a female to a male, develops a love relationship with his male-to-female transsexual girlfriend named Lola. Robert was deprived of a full sexual change, and so he still retains his cervix and uterus. The deeper story within the story is Robert’s coming to grips with a diagnosis of uterine cancer, his own unbelievable torments, and the prejudices he finds in the medical community. In a world that values purity, this community of people who are transsexual must face intolerance, bigotry, and even hatred. The dignity of their story lies in their relationships with one another and those who are close who accept their “flesh,” the way they are in the world. To find compassion in a world

<sup>9</sup>Robert Pensack and Dwight Williams, *Raising Lazarus* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1994).

where perfection and purity are valued is difficult at best for many and impossible for some. This powerful story challenges all of us to find the place inside ourselves that we try to change and can't, that we dislike and others hate, and to find ways that we can accept and love the flesh that we are.

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In the first section of our course, we attended a production of the play entitled *Kin: The Trial of Carrie Buck*. Advertised on the Augustana College website,<sup>10</sup> the play is described thus:

*Kin: The Trial of Carrie Buck* is the true, tragic, and shameful story of eugenics and legalized sterilization in America. Barker's play is based on a real account of the eugenics movement in America—legalized sterilization of less than perfect humans—which became “fertile soil” for the Holocaust.

There is a strong connection to today's headlines, where parents have chosen to alter their child physically based on the child's mental health and physical disabilities. The play brings up ethical questions found in many of these medical decisions.

This presentation powerfully indicted our American culture. It is so easy for us to see the horror of what happened in Germany during the Holocaust. Just as powerful, and more shameful, is to see our own complicity in the eugenics movement in the United States. Our fear of the impure led to the sterilization of over 56,000 people in the United States alone. We were not created as purebreds, as some kind of semi-perfect junior deities. And yet our human history betrays our fear of impurities and the imperfections we carry. In our class as we discussed the play, we discovered that one of the greatest spiritual dilemmas we face is our fear of the flesh of those who are other to us. Dr. Harris and I learn from each other and with the students that we all face a kind of prejudice of the flesh—of flesh that is different, untidy, unclean, impure. And yet we discover that each of us bears that which is finite—that which is different, untidy, unclean, messy, and impure. The spiritual dilemma that we face is whether we can trust that God also engages that ragged edge where the finite and infinite meet.

#### THE SCANDAL OF THE FLESH

As human beings who live in an agonizing, messy, complicated world, we often long for that which is clear, pure, simple, and sterile. We want to know whether something is right or wrong, true or false, good or evil. But the Word doesn't come

<sup>10</sup>See [http://www.augie.edu/news/pressrel/2007/feb/2\\_8.htm](http://www.augie.edu/news/pressrel/2007/feb/2_8.htm) (accessed 3 March 2007).

that way to us. God comes as one who isn't pure or perfect. God comes in the flesh—in the finite. Or in Haraway's words: God comes in the lives of the undocumented, the poor, the lowly, those who are diseased.

According to the Gospel of John, God sets up camp and dwells in this world, in all of its craziness, scruffiness, and disarray. Nikos Kazantzakis once wrote: "Within me even the most metaphysical problem takes on a warm physical body which smells of sea, soil, and human sweat. The Word, in order to touch me, must become warm flesh. Only then do I understand—when I can smell, see, and touch."<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps better than anyone, St. Teresa of Avila understood the radical nature of this embodied God.<sup>12</sup> October 15 is the day set aside to celebrate the life of St. Teresa. She is celebrated as a Spanish mystic, was canonized in 1622, and in 1970 made a doctor of the church, the first woman to receive such an honor from the Roman Catholic Church. In the Cornaro Chapel of the Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria is a statue by Bernini titled, "The Ecstasy of St. Teresa." Through his use of baroque ornamentation, Bernini captures Teresa's spiritual rapture in marble. An angel stands with a large golden spear above a reclining, enraptured Teresa. The passage from Teresa's *Vida* on which Bernini bases his sculpture has offended generations over the centuries. Most recently Dan Brown has quoted it in his popular novels. Teresa writes:

Beside me on the left appeared an angel in bodily form....He was not tall but short, and very beautiful; and his face was so aflame that he appeared to be one of the highest ranks of angels, who seem to be all on fire....In his hands I saw a great golden spear, and at the iron tip there appeared to be a point of fire. This he plunged into my heart several times so that it penetrated my entrails. When he pulled it out I felt that he took them with it, and left me utterly consumed by the great love of God. The pain was so severe that it made me utter several moans. The sweetness caused by this intense pain is so extreme that one can not possibly wish it to cease, nor is one's soul content with anything but God. This is not a physical but a spiritual pain, though the body has some share in it—even a considerable share.<sup>13</sup>

Teresa recounts her vision to her confessors, no matter how scandalous or alarming it might be. She finds nothing problematic or embarrassing about it. She celebrates this incarnational love story with God. For Teresa, faith is a passionate love affair with God. Her words seem scandalous even today, let alone for a woman of the sixteenth century. Described as witty, beautiful, bright, and an aficionado of

<sup>11</sup>Nikos Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965) 43.

<sup>12</sup>See Cathleen Medwick, *Teresa of Avila: The Progress of a Soul* (New York: Doubleday, 2001); <http://www.boglewood.com/cornaro/xteresa.html> (accessed 3 March 2007); <http://www.karmel.at/eng/teresa.htm> (accessed 3 March 2007).

<sup>13</sup>As cited, with pictures of the sculpture, at <http://www.boglewood.com/cornaro/xteresa.html> (accessed 6 March 2007). For the quotation in context, see Teresa, "The Life of the Holy Mother Teresa of Jesus," in *The Complete Works of Saint Teresa of Jesus*, trans. and ed. E. Allison Peers, vol. 1 (London and New York: Sheed & Ward, 1946) 192–193.

good books, Teresa of Avila was such a threat to others during her life that the Inquisition was always near. Her experiences of rapture or ecstasy with God frightened some and defied others. Who was this Carmelite nun who journeyed all over the region, spoke with the rich and powerful, was surrounded by influential male Jesuit confessors, reformed her own order, and started seventeen other convents?

Is her offense that she is a powerful woman or a rapturous mystic? Possibly so. But I think her real offense resides in her public declaration of her passionate love for God. In words many of us would be reluctant or embarrassed to use, Teresa flourishes and waxes eloquent about this intimate relationship with God. When I read her words I think about another sixteenth-century reformer who caused just as much scandal, a German monk named Martin Luther. At first glance this German monk and Spanish nun may seem to have nothing in common. But at another level they both have unrestrained personalities, were watched by the Inquisition, suffered extreme mood swings and debilitating illnesses, screamed at the devil, pleaded with God, and offended those around them. However, I believe what caused most offense about their “reform” was their articulation of a passionate, intimate, incarnate faith. Both Martin Luther and Teresa of Avila were unabashedly unafraid to proclaim how they had experienced God, deeply incarnate in their lives. Both were in love with God. As my colleague at Augustana College Richard Bowman says: “Teresa didn’t spiritualize sexuality, she sexualized spirituality.” The God who enters into the flesh and blood of our lives is passionately in love with us.

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We celebrate the Christmas gospel as if we were still Docetists, leaving the flesh out of nature, out of both divine and human nature. That the finite is capable of the infinite becomes good news only when we can proclaim that all flesh becomes pleasing to God on account of Christ. Luther explains this in his *Lectures on Galatians* (1535):

Whatever our person says, does, or thinks in private is pleasing to God, not indeed on our account but on account of Christ, whom we believe to have been born under the Law for us. Now we are most certain that Christ is pleasing to God and that He is holy. To the extent that Christ is pleasing to God and that we cling to Him, to that extent, we, too, are pleasing to God and holy.<sup>14</sup>

This blessed exchange of divine and human pleasure is indeed good news. Christ *in-forms* the flesh of the world, making it new. Such intimacy we can now claim is for all creation. Luther writes: “Christ is my ‘form,’ which adorns my faith as color or light adorns a wall. (This fact has to be expounded in this crude way, for there is no

<sup>14</sup>LW 26:378.

spiritual way for us to grasp the idea that Christ clings and dwells in us as closely and intimately as light or whiteness clings to a wall).<sup>15</sup>

I have a feeling that our liturgy, adult forums, Sunday school, and other gatherings would be radically different if we took our calling seriously to love and care for this finite world with the passion of a St. Teresa or Brother Martin. Think then how our mission might be shaped! Is the church ready not only to know this kind of radical love but also to practice it? The question is whether or not the Christian community can embrace that which God embraces. Luther claims that “the sacrament is not a sign of the absent body of Christ but is the body of Christ himself, as that by which not only is our body physically fed but also the nature and substance of our body is nourished, strengthened, and sustained unto eternal life and becomes a member of the body of Christ.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the body of Christ nourishes, strengthens, and sustains all of life. The formula *finitum capax infiniti* can indeed be good tidings of a great joy. ⊕

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<sup>15</sup>LW 26:167.

<sup>16</sup>Luther, “This Is My Body,” in LW 37:119.