

FAITHFUL WORDS MEDITATION: ON INCARNATION

Uncovering the Spark Within

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Every year in December, when I haul out an old cardboard box of handmade bows used and reused over time, I recall the first official job I ever had – in my grandfather’s jewelry store where I helped out in the holiday season gift-wrapping customers’ purchases. It was there that I learned to make bows, spindling the ribbon around my hand and then pulling one looped strand out at a time until the bow opened in my palm like a blossom without a stem. And it was there that I learned to carefully crease the edges of the silver wrapping paper, making crisp corners on the little boxes containing gold rings or watches, silver bracelets or diamond tie tacks. “The outside,” my perfection-driven uncle would say looking over my shoulder, “should be as beautiful as the jewelry inside.”

Now, decades later, I still appreciate the beauty of a plump handmade bow on shiny paper with crisp corners. But I’ve come to understand that Incarnation and the old story of Christmas, with all its echoes and layers of meaning, is more about the kind of gift wrapping my son Charlie now does than the kind I did in the jewelry store long ago. Charlie wraps his presents in brown butcher paper. Sometimes he decorates these packages with markers, drawing elaborate designs across the brown paper; usually he ties them carefully with twine or white string. Their hallmark simplicity is quite different from the gifts that I wrapped long ago. You see, the appeal of Charlie’s gift-wrapping is that it looks so very common you can’t help but wonder, *What extraordinary gift might been hidden within?*

The natural world around us offers so many examples of this kind of brown-paper wrapping: the limestone encasing a geode’s crystal core. The oyster shell cradling its pearl. The dusty brown milkweed pod packed with white silken seeds inside.

“Earth but cloaks our heaven,” Fra Giovanni wrote on a Christmas Eve almost 500 years ago. By which we might understand him to be saying that the holy glimmers everywhere around us and within us, if we would but look beneath the coverings that conceal it. “I beseech you to look,” Fra Giovanni says, and continues: “We, judging (life’s) gifts by their covering, cast them away as ugly or heavy or hard. Remove the covering, he

advises, and you will find beneath it a living splendor, woven of love by wisdom, with power. . . . Life is so generous a giver.”

There are days, of course, when I have trouble seeing this living splendor within, whether I’m looking at my self or others. Under the coverings of faults and failings, fears and petty resentments, self absorption or harsh judgment of others, I sometimes see anything but the holy ember shimmering in us all. Or I convince myself that the divine spark in me is just too small to make a difference; in the face of violence, poverty and ecological devastation looming large everywhere I look, what purpose really can a little spark serve? Fortunately, there are stories, too, that remind us what even the smallest glimmer can do.

Remember the weeks before the Berlin Wall came down? Remember how the tension mounted 20 years ago this Fall as protestors were beaten and arrested in government crackdowns throughout East Germany? Remember how the people gathered anyway in churches, how they carried candles that they lit after their prayers, how they walked through the city streets, flames flickering on their short blackened wicks while the soldiers and police stood by with their guns and their sticks?

“We were prepared for everything,” said a leader of the Communist Party, “but not for candles and prayers.” The Berlin Wall came down, not under the force of gunfire but rather, under the flickering light that begins within us all.

Courage then, to claim this inner light. This shining pearl. This winged and silken seed. This sparkling gem within. The Berlin Wall is down but so many others are standing still. May you, may I, may we, all have eyes to see and patience to kindle the holy spark we have each been given. The night is now long. Lift high your inner light and let it shine.

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