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Advent Devotional "The Child Immanuel"

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Advent Devotional
Sunday, November 28, 1999
The Child Immanuel
Isaiah 7:10-16

It is All Hallow's Eve and my mind prepares for All Saint's Day, as it should, by turning to the departed saints. The annual time to consider those who have gone before leaves me with an unusual collection of memories. This Christian "New Year's Eve" is peopled with thoughts of friends and loved ones and their part in my own spiritual heritage and pilgrimage. Thoughts of those from our own fellowship give way as others crowd in, a parade of faces that stretches back across half a century to my earliest recollection of death's reality and finality. I think of one of my father's greatest gifts as a pastor—his special ability to comfort those who mourn, and turn their eyes to God's promise that just as the grave yawns to receive a loved one's mortal remains, so it also opens into life eternal.

Most of the faces in this parade of known and loved show the maturity of the fullness of time. Occasionally there is no mature visage, only the face of one forever young, taken untimely by illness or accident. Some are contemporaries, others children preceding parents in death. Increasingly the familiar faces dim, then recede into the darkness. Two presences remain, both unknown, yet known. No pleasant associations accompany these two faceless forms, but they too play their part in this reminiscence of faith and past.

The first form helps me understand the second from a new perspective, and adds a fresh garland to the festoons with which I begin the Advent season. It is near

in time, dating back only a year, and it is the form of one who was almost family.

Last Christmas our older children, Stephen and his wife Misty, were coming home. Though he's a student, her work keeps them close to their North Carolina home. The 2,000 miles to Arkansas and back make visits rare; they've been able to come one of the four Christmases they've spent in Durham. Anticipation ran high; careful plans were laid.

Like many careful plans, these went awry. A Saturday phone call from eastern Tennessee informed us that Misty had been unexpectedly pregnant, but might be no longer. Pain and a mid-night trip to the emergency room had interrupted both their thoughts and trip. By Monday evening we all knew that Stephen and Misty had been pregnant for only a day, and that while they would celebrate this Christmas at home, it would not be at home with us. We all knew also that over both homes would hang the pall of that hectic weekend and the (figuratively) empty chair.

Rationally, it's easy (and correct) to say that it all worked out well. They know they're fertile, her body took care of itself, and the miscarriage occurred before they had invested months in thinking about and planning for the child's arrival. But the emotional roller coaster, despite the short ride, was tough for all concerned. We spent a great deal of time on the phone, and Ronnie and I fought the impulse, initial and constant, to fly to Knoxville, TN, rent a car, and head to Newport. Our children were in pain, and the urge to go and comfort them was overwhelming.

Reliving that weekend brought me to the manger, where on another Christmas another couple faced reproductive issues on a journey. This year, I see that

stable scene through the lens of last year's experience with a child who was almost family and two children who are. I see at the manger two fathers, one earthly and one heavenly. My mind is drawn to the One who watched His Son's birth, knowing the pain ahead. Through the Child I see the Father's love: love that felt the overwhelming urge to comfort His children; love that flew to their comfort in a child's form; love that wept with them and for them, and finally wept tears of blood as it sought to embrace us all.

So I begin this Advent season at the Child's side, more cognizant than I have been in the past of the truth of the adult's words: in seeing Him, we see the Father.

Ray Granada