

# An Incarnate Christmas

A trip to Bethlehem inspired me to purchase a Nativity set hand carved from the wood of olive trees grown in the Holy Land. That set brings a piece of the traditional birthplace of Jesus into my home.

Since 1223, when St. Francis of Assisi assembled a Nativity scene with a live ox and donkey in a cave in central Italy, Christians have depicted Christ's birth in the manger in settings in churches, towns, and homes. Whether simple or elaborate, the scenes bring comfort and joy, for they tell of the birth of a child and the fulfillment of God's promise.

The Order for the Blessing of a Christmas Manger or Nativity Scene in the *Book of Blessings* articulates the story of the Incarnation. It is a story of how God loved his people so much he sent his Son to be with them:

God of every nation and people,  
from the very beginning of creation  
you have made manifest your love:  
when our need for a Savior was great  
you sent your Son to be born of the

Virgin Mary.

To our lives he brings joy and peace,  
justice, mercy, and love.

Lord,  
bless all who look upon this manger;  
may it remind us of the humble birth of Jesus,  
and raise up our thoughts to him,  
who is God-with-us and Savior of all,  
and who lives and reigns for ever and ever.

This blessing reveals how Jesus came for all, and that through our Savior, all are connected. It reveals, too, that the coming of Christ was part of God's plan from the beginning of creation. Listening to these words, the faithful may understand that if the Messiah came through a humble person such as Mary, God can break through ordinary lives and can come in ways surprising and wondrous. When people surrender, like



Christmas celebrates that God became flesh and lives with us.

Mary, to God's will, they can bear Christ, becoming a vessel of joy and peace, justice, mercy, and love.

Christian lives can bear Christ even during a chaotic time where peace seems to be distant. Jesus was born into turbulence. He was conceived in an unmarried woman, at birth was placed in a feeding trough for animals, and soon was hunted by a jealous king. Despite these circumstances, God chose to be born anyway. Knowing this can strengthen people to bear witness to God's presence even when uncertainty marks their lives.

May we who adorn our homes and churches with Nativity sets remember that Christmas is not only about the celebration of the birth of the baby Jesus two thousand years ago, but that God became flesh and lives with us now, today, forever.

