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DECEMBER 2024 ISSUE

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What is The Empty Tomb Project?

Empty Tomb Project: The Magazine is a non-profit that exists to bring the reality and power of the empty tomb to as many people as possible. We are convinced that if men and women encounter Jesus as a real living person their lives will be radically changed.

We are an evangelization company that desires to bring relevant cultural and spiritual topics to our readers in an honest and fresh manner. We dive into topics that truly matter to people, themes that are brought up in people's homes as well as in church circles. We desire to bring uniformity in message and an increase in inspiration to Catholics across Long Island (and beyond).

Along with providing the most dynamic content we are committed to producing a product that is beautifully captivating to the eye. To do so we rely on the faithful designers at Startup Catholic so that the content can be amplified by the aesthetics of the magazine.

In order to reach as many people as possible with the critically important message of Christ we rely on donors in order to grow the mission and impact of our magazine. This will allow us to remain free and ensure that anyone who desires to meet Jesus today will have that opportunity. If you feel called to support us, please reach out via email: EmptyTombProject@gmail.com and join us in the mission! All donations are tax deductible.

Spend Time in Bethlehem

By Thomas Griffin



In 1978 Pope John Paul II celebrated his first Christmas Eve Mass as Holy Father. During his homily, the pope offered timeless and powerful words concerning the strange nature of what we celebrate on this day. Through the strangeness, God's identity is revealed.

The pope revealed that his personal desire was to celebrate Mass in Bethlehem for his first Christmas as pope. He noted: "Since circumstances do not allow me to do that, finding myself here with all of you, I am endeavouring all the more to be there spiritually with you all, in order to crown this Liturgy with the depth, the ardour, the authenticity of an intense inner feeling."

John Paul, as he would continue to show over the course of his pontificate, was most concerned with highlighting the need for faith to be personal. It is Christmas which first proclaims this truth to the nations. This child, this baby, is the One we are called to know deeply as a real living person.

"For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord (Luke 2:11).

This is undoubtedly true, but "at this moment, at this strange hour, the ends of the earth are still afar off. They are pervaded by a period of waiting, far from peace. The hearts of people are filled rather with weariness; people have fallen asleep, as have the shepherds in the Bethlehem valleys close by. What is happening in the stable, in the rock cave, has a dimension of profound intimacy: it is something between the Mother and the Babe to be born."

The manger scene was strange because it was the moment that God was born into the world but no one welcomed him. It is strange because the King of Kings came to us but the world continued on as if nothing had changed. Today, this day is still strange because the truth of God born among us leaves us the same each and every year when it should change us deep in our core.

"It is a strange feast," the pope continues, because God "reveals himself in that body as one of us, a little infant, in all his frailty and vulnerability. Dependent upon people's care, entrusted to their love, undefended. He wails, and the world does not hear him, cannot hear him. The newborn


infant's wail can only just be heard a few steps away.”

Until reading John Paul’s homily this Advent I had never really considered this. Jesus would have wailed and cried, as all babies do when they are born. As a father of three children I can almost hear now the particular cries of my kids when they were born. Jesus came into the world to save us and he desires all to know him. And yet, we too often ignore his cries. The cries he gives pleading for us to speak to him each day. The cries he gives for us to realize that we do not need to do anything to earn his love. The cries he proclaims over you that you are his and that he has come specifically for you.

This Christmas, let us accept the invitation from this great saint to yearn to be with Jesus in that place where he was born. Let us carve out time to truly consider what it would have been like to see that newborn baby worshiped by stranger shepherds and kings. May their posture be ours as they fell before this infant who is God in the flesh.

Christmas is strange. It offers us renewal and a new beginning but we too easily settle for the same old existence. The Incarnation is strange. God comes so close to us that we can overlook Him and ignore Him.

The question for us this Christmas is whether or not we will yearn to be with the baby in Bethlehem or if we will be like those villagers from two thousand years ago who heard his cries but kept going their way. Choose to draw near. Choose to be changed. Choose to be with the God of the universe as He enters the world to be with you - for that is His whole reason for arriving.



Thomas Griffin is the chairperson of the Religion Department at a Catholic High School on Long Island where he lives with his wife and three children. He is the founder and editor-in-chief of Empty Tomb Project: The Magazine. He is the author of Let Us Begin: Saint Francis's Way of Becoming Like Christ and Renewing the World.



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Gain Unshakeable Christmas Peace

By David Bonagura

We have heard the prophecy: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given...and his name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6). We know the angels’ song: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men!” (Luke 2:14). We sing the refrain of Silent Night: “Sleep in heavenly peace.”

But what exactly is this peace during Christmas? Where do we find it? In the pre-Christmas preparation frenzy? In the whirlwind of celebrations with sugared up kids tearing open presents? In going to work on December 26? Does the Prince of Peace not worry about Black Friday and Cyber Monday sales?

If peace is “a state of quiet or tranquility; freedom from disturbance or agitation,” as the dictionary declares, then the overscheduled and overstimulated Christmas I experience is not about peace.

There is an added wrinkle: When the Christ-child grows up, He announces, “Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division; for henceforth in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided, father against son and son against father” (Luke 12:51-53).

The Prince of Peace is for division? Don’t we have enough of that among men that we don’t need God adding to the conflict?

We have to be missing something. Perhaps God has a different understanding of peace than those of us seeking a Christmas without disturbances?

In Psalm 119 we read, “Great peace have those who love your law; nothing can make them stumble. I hope for your salvation, O Lord, and I do your commandments” (vv. 165-166).

The Psalmist’s peace is not a freedom from disturbance. It is a state of being, one chosen by entering into a relationship with the Lord and carrying out His commands. External distractions loom over, and may even shake the peace, but they do not break it. We find this kind of peace also in the famous Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want... Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me” (vv. 1, 4).

A hundred gifts to buy, cookies to bake, kids’ toys to assemble can drop us into a soul-swallowing valley, but there is no need to fear. If we receive the infant Christ into our hearts and make every effort to keep Him there through prayer and following His commands, then we will have found peace. It is not a peace without agitation; that does not exist in this world. This peace is a



confidence and strength that helps us withstand agitation, that keeps us from breaking down or heating up when putting those toys together has eaten two hours with no end in sight.

Through the Psalmist, the Lord tells us how He is the real driver of our peace: "Because he clings to me in love, I will deliver him; I will protect him, because he knows my name. When he calls to me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will rescue him and honor him" (Psalm 91:14-15).

Christ is the Prince of Peace because He delivers and protects us from the world's horrors, which, though they can afflict our minds and bodies, cannot destroy our souls. We can sleep in heavenly peace because He is with us, no matter what lurks over us.

The division Christ promised later in His ministry comes not from Him, but from those who reject Him. From King Herod until our own day, refusing to accept Christ as king leads to perpetual agitation, for without Him there can be no guarantee through the battles of life. Those who reject Christ choose the sword rather than peace.

At Christmas our spare moments may be few, but when we are at Mass or at prayer, we draw close to the divine infant in the stable. As we return to our earthly tasks, we need not fear any evil, for through the incarnation God is with us. This reality is the only peace that cannot be shaken.

*David G. Bonagura, Jr. is an adjunct professor at St. Joseph's Seminary. He is the author of *Steadfast in Faith, Staying with the Catholic Church, and Jerome's Tears*.*





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The Lion in the Manger

By Mary Molloy

O come, O come, Emmanuel And ransom captive Israel That mourns in lonely exile here Until the Son of God appear Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel Shall come to thee O Israel.

Since I was young, I've been deeply moved by the theme of hope and longing in the hymn "O Come O Come Emmanuel." The contrast between Christmas lights and the Advent wreath candles against winter's increasing darkness creates a powerful metaphor for the human heart's deepest yearnings.

In Salvation History, the Israelites faced seemingly hopeless circumstances. They had cruel and unjust kings, Babylon exiled them and destroyed their Temple, they faced merciless foes who enslaved them and killed even the smallest and most vulnerable of their children. When the first Christmas took place Rome's iron grip had crushed any rebellion through cruel public execution. Yet even as slavery, injustice, and fear plagued their hearts, they clung to something greater: the Promise of the Messiah, the Son of David whose reign would endure forever.

How often it must have seemed illogical for the Israelites to maintain hope in the Covenant's fulfillment. Yet they gathered faithfully in synagogues and the temple, recounting God's mighty works throughout their history. The same God who parted the Red Sea, who sent plagues upon Egypt, who stopped the sun for Joshua's victory – this was the God who promised a Messiah to deliver His people and establish an eternal Kingdom.

This Promise, backed by God's unwavering faithfulness, offers a firm foundation that darkness can and will be overcome. The promised Son of David, known as the Lion of Judah, will be a fierce defender of His people. Through centuries of hardship, this knowledge of a coming Warrior-King gave the Israelites strength to persevere in faith for another day. When I first heard this title of Jesus as the Lion of Judah, I felt courage begin to bubble up in my heart. The Israelites must have felt this as well. If the Lion is on our side then surely there can be nothing to fear, not even darkness itself.

For us as Catholics today, this hope burns even brighter. We know the Lion of Judah personally and can approach Him directly through the Eucharist. In my own journey, I have found profound consolation in the tangible graces of the Sacraments and the living words of Scripture. When anxiety and shame threaten to overwhelm my mind, I hear Jesus speaking words of love and truth directly to my heart. When I receive the Eucharist and kneel in Eucharistic Adoration, I cannot help but be moved by how humble the Lord has become through the appearance of bread and wine. When I receive the Eucharist, God Himself has united Himself to me in such a way that I can run to Him without fear because of His littleness. His humility in appearing so little and vulnerable shows me that He desires unity with me and for me to not hide from Him.

Through Scripture, Jesus speaks love and mercy to the forgotten and hopeless places in our hearts. Where we're broken, He comes as the Divine Physician bringing healing. When anxiety and self-hatred batter us, He appears as the Lion of Judah and Warrior-King. As death's sting threatens, He stands as the Resurrection and the Life who has already claimed victory. Through the Sacraments – especially the Eucharist – we can experience His real presence, drawing us from darkness into His Heart, the Fountain of Life.

This is our living Hope: God sees our weakness and continually humbles Himself to enter our darkness and lead us into light. While cultures shift and lives face storms, He remains unshakeable. Above all, God is Love – faithful to His promises, He is just and overflowing with mercy.

Though my heart often forgets how to love and stay faithful, and I struggle with self-interest and discouragement, the Lion of Judah has conquered my darkness with His mercy and power. Through the Sacraments and Scripture, He invites us all into a deeper relationship with Him. In these sacred encounters, we are called to surrender to Christ's transforming love. His victory gives us hope that beyond today's trials lies an eternal joy where, face to face with Him, all sadness will fade away and be replaced by a deep and abiding joy that cannot be taken away.

All of it begins with the Lion of Judah placed in a manger.

Mary Molloy teaches Religion at a Catholic high school on Long Island. She received her BA & MA in Catechetics and Theology from Franciscan University of Steubenville. She has spent the last 15 years in ministry both international and domestically. Her favorite thing is to serve the poor and spend quality time with her loved ones.

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Let Us Begin

Saint Francis's Way of Becoming
Like Christ and Renewing
the World

Thomas Griffin

Foreword by Fr. Mark-Mary Ames, CFR

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BOOK DESCRIPTION

Our culture is broken. The remedy is not a program or a worldwide initiative. The answer is found in personal renewal.



Make a Christmas-Solution

By Steve Deere

What if this year you made your resolutions on Christmas, not New Year's? We associate Christmas with gifts and New Year's with resolutions. What if we had it backwards? New Year's Day is the traditional resolution making holiday. But, this year could you make your resolutions on Christmas instead of New Year's?

Christmas tends to be grand. We light up our houses and put out fancy things. We dress up presents with wrapping and have special outfits for the day. Jesus' birth in Bethlehem was very unfancy. It was deeply humbling. We all know the story. No one had any room for Him. The savior of the world was born outdoors, wrapped in a blanket, and surrounded by animals.

Babies represent hope. This tiny person could be or do anything. They represent possibilities. We feel a smaller version of this on New Year's Eve. In this new year we could do anything. We could be anyone. We could start anew.

The baby Jesus is the ultimate hope. God humbled Himself and entered the world for us. God changed history and entered the world as a baby. Why a baby? Why not come down from the sky on a chariot with flames? What about as a booming voice from above, separating water and moving the land? I wrestled with this question. I tried to solve this puzzle. I have one idea.

Christmas is the ultimate sneak attack. God sees the world and resolves to rescue it. Out of habit we associate rescuers with strength. No one gets rescued by someone weaker than they are. To us rescue looks like lifeguards, ambulances, police officers, firefighters, and nurses. God didn't send the Marines to Bethlehem. He didn't send ambulances or helicopters. He sent a baby.

Babies represent hope, but they are helpless and vulnerable. Babies need to be taught everything. They need to be provided for. Every mother in the pews at Christmas Day Mass could fill a hymnal with stories about bad behavior. We hope they'll grow out of it" is a common sentiment. Kids improve as they age. Each year they can become better. They become more capable of caring for themselves and helping the world.

We are the same. Most of us resolve to change and improve. We want to be better next month and next year then we are today. Jesus was perfect. He didn't improve between Christmas and his death on Good Friday. Jesus wasn't here to improve Himself, but He can improve us.

Being born makes God like us and gives us an example for how to live our own lives. It starts on Christmas in the manger. The Gospels are also filled with stories to help us be better. It's prime resolution material. Jesus, the baby grown into savior, attended weddings . . .grieved friends . . . taught people . . . battled the Devil . . . suffered . . .ate meals . . . worshipped in the temple . . . worked . . . and loved. The examples from the Gospels are endless. The Gospels are the ultimate self-help book. His birth makes possible the examples that help us improve.

The fresh calendar on January 1st seems like the perfect time to change, but this year let Christmas inspire you to make changes. We make resolutions to change constantly. Losing weight, saving more money, being kinder, reconciling differences, and attending church more are all amazing resolutions – and we should make them. Starting your resolutions on Christmas means we'll have a week's head-start on everyone else and the fuel of the God-child born in Bethlehem to aid us. The momentum will be on our side because we'll honor the occasion of our Savior's birth.

Celebrate Jesus' birth by making a resolution to be better. Make your resolution on Christmas, not New Year's. Then watch as your Christmas-Solution makes you more like Him.

Steve Deere lives on Long Island with his wife and three children. He is a parishioner of St. Barnabas the Apostle Parish in Bellmore. He served in Iraq with the Army and now works in finance in Manhattan.

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