

Living the incarnation

From the Editors in the [December 16, 1998](#) issue

Some Christian theologians these days are involved in an important discussion about the limits of our knowledge and speech about God. Those who listen in will hear a lot of talk about emptiness, otherness, negation, difference and nonbeing. They'll also notice that the conversation focuses on the "not yet" of divine disclosure rather than on what has already been revealed-on divine absence rather than divine presence.

But a theology that takes limits seriously meets a limit of its own in a season that points to the fullness of time, when God comes to us revealed in a human being. Advent presses Christians to exalt in the Bible's extravagant language of affirmation. At this time of the year we speak of fulfillment, abundance, closeness and similarity, of valleys lifted up and mountains brought low, of water renewing parched land. Our attention is trained on the already and now, on God with us. In Advent Christians are seized by the scandal of the incarnation-a moment of divine self-revelation as startling as the scandal of the cross. And as scandals go, the theology of negation seems more comfortable with the latter than the former.

Negative theology must, however, be given its due also where the incarnation is concerned. The path is uncomfortably short between the incarnation's God with Us and a cozier presumption that God "R" Us. When God is blithely enlisted in service to all manner of human projects, when we speak of God's presence and God's will with the confidence of comfortable familiarity, negative theology abrasively reminds us of God's difference from us and our world. To be reminded of God's absence from our space and time is to redirect a misguided incarnational faith in which we, rather than God, become the center of attention.

But we also suspect that a more general awareness of God's absence increases as the church's commitment to a true incarnational lifestyle diminishes. When God's coming to us ceases to be made visible in Christian lives, then the incarnation's immoderate language of presence and fulfillment becomes empty indeed. But this year Advent presents Christians with an urgent invitation to embody anew the words "God with us."

Just weeks ago Hurricane Mitch devastated several countries in Central America, killing thousands and rendering many more thousands homeless. One relief worker called the destruction unimaginable to anyone who has not witnessed it immediately.

Central to the incarnational life is the holy compulsion to alleviate suffering. Those who have come to themselves as a result of God's coming in the incarnation will run, not walk, in coming to the aid of others. In last week's issue the Christian Century ran a list of agencies that are working to arrest the suffering of those struck by the disaster. We ask readers to support as generously as possible one or more of the groups listed.

Storms like Mitch force us to acknowledge that our lives are lived both in the time of the already *and* the not yet. Advent's message of God's presence with us even in this time between the times is most powerfully professed when God's prodigal love expressed in the incarnation is reflected in prodigal works of Christian love.