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I know that most radio stations have already stopped playing Christmas music, that Christmas trees — real and artificial — have been taken down in many households, and that CVS and Walgreens are already displaying Valentine's Day candy nearly two months ahead of time, but according to the liturgical calendar, we are still in the octave of Christmas (which makes today as much a Christmas solemnity as the 25th). So I find myself in a holiday spirit of cultural defiance and wanting to write another Christmas column.

To those who wish to move on quickly to something else, I say, "Bah! Humbug!"

Ever since Christmas Day, I have found myself reflecting on how the Scripture readings for the [Mass during the day](#), especially the second reading from the Letter to the Hebrews and the Gospel from John, really speak to our recent pandemic experience.

While I am [reluctantly grateful](#) for modern technology like Zoom and FaceTime that allowed us to connect with family and friends during the worst of the pandemic — before there was a vaccine and travel was unsafe — I, like most of us, quickly realized that it was a poor simulacrum of real-life relationships and personal connection.

Yeah, we could "see" and "hear" each other in real time, adding a layer of dynamism and connection not found over the phone or by email. But the fundamental embodied experience of being together with others in the same space, three-dimensionally, with the ability to touch, embrace and respond to others was still absent.

I was reminded of the differences between the experience of Christmas virtual gatherings over Zoom during 2020 and the return to something resembling normalcy now when reading the opening lines of the Letter to the Hebrews ([1:1-3](#)) proclaimed at the daytime Christmas liturgy:

In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors
through the prophets;
in these last days, he spoke to us through a son, whom he made heir of all
things and through whom he created the universe,
who is the refulgence of his glory,

the very imprint of his being,
and who sustains all things by his mighty word.



(Unsplash/Luana Azevedo)

Indeed, the way that God revealed Godself to us in times past were "partial" and "various," they were good but incomplete; true but disembodied; powerful but not incarnate.

In light of the experience of the pandemic, we might consider that the divine motive for the Incarnation — the absolute [primacy of love](#) and desire to enter creation as part of that creation — is analogous to our human motive for gathering with loved ones in person.

Sure, we had been able previously to connect in "partial" and "various" ways with those we care about, but we also know the experience of not being able to stand the disembodied distance of pandemic separation: the pain of grandparents unable to hold their newborn grandchildren, of friends separated and unable to spend time together, of lovers unable to embrace their partners, or of children unable to hug their parents.

What we continue to celebrate during this Christmas octave is God's response to this divine desire to overcome the distance between God's previous self-disclosure in partial ways and the fullness of human relationship through the incarnation and life of Christ. Indeed, God so loved the world that God could not stand being apart from it — from us — and so the Word became flesh.

The prologue of the Gospel of John proclaimed at the Christmas liturgy is also more than a poetic or philosophical reflection. It is a true introduction to the good news contained in the chapters that follow. [The last verse of that opening chapter](#) (Verse 18) is easy to overlook, but I think it is one of the most significant lines of the prologue: "No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father's side, has revealed him."



Pope Francis touches a figurine of the baby Jesus during an audience with the donors of the Vatican Christmas tree and the Nativity scenes, Dec. 3, 2022, in the Paul VI hall at the Vatican. (CNS/Reuters/Remo Casilli)

Like the opening lines of the Letter to the Hebrews, this verse highlights the absolute “game changer” of the incarnation, stating directly and succinctly that however God may have disclosed the divine will to us previously, the simple fact is that no one — not Abraham, Sarah, Moses, David or anybody else — had ever *seen* God. What we see (and also what we hear and feel and touch) in this person Jesus of Nazareth is a full expression and embodiment of God among us in a cosmically new way.

This verse also serves as the cardinal point in the prologue, the bridge between the introduction and the content of the Jesus story that follows. In effect it proclaims that if you want to know what God is like, what God cares about, what God *does not* care

about, what is important to God, how God thinks, how God loves, with whom God identifies and associates, then keep reading the story and look at Jesus.

The beginning of this story is what we commemorate during this Christmas season, but we cannot let Christmas become just a birthday party once a year that merely acknowledges one person's birth. Instead, the Christmas season ought to be the celebration of both the incomprehensible divine love that leads to God's entrance into creation as one of us and the challenge of what the divine life in Jesus of Nazareth means for those of us who dare to call ourselves Christian.

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In some ways it is easier to connect with friends and loved ones over Zoom. There is no travel required, little risk, and an easy exit from the conversation or virtual gathering, if need be. To be with others in person introduces a necessary vulnerability and requires an openness to the unknown. But it also is the fullest way we can relate to one another.

What Christmas celebrates is that God has taken that risk, embraced the vulnerability, traveled the infinite distance between the comfort of divine life and the precarity of human creatureliness. It is also the fullest way that God can relate to us, choosing not only to know about us from a distance but to know us as one of us.

As this Christmas season continues, if only for a few more days, may it be a time when we remember what it's like to miss the experience of being with our loved ones in person, the desire to draw near to them as soon as we could and recognize that God also knows that feeling.