Columns
Spirituality



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If we ever needed the Incarnation, we need it today. As the year draws to a close, I can't help but feel sad and a bit fearful for our future. Something seems to be infecting us as a people.

There seems to be a blindness and a deafness to see and hear each other as we truly are and to understand our place within the whole Earth community. Because we can't see or hear, we are stuck right where we are and no amount of facts, moral persuasion or even personal experience of another's suffering is enough to move us.

Perhaps during Advent, we can find hope in remembering the meaning of Incarnation and the challenge to live it today.

Incarnation reveals to us that God, by whatever name, is one with humanity and creation. Jesus gave God flesh, blood and a body and told us we are all loved and we need to love one another. He spoke about how important each one of us is, in metaphors that embraced the birds of the air, the loaves and the fishes, the mother hen and her chicks. He shared how he and his Abba God live within us and that we would do greater things than he. He expressed anger when those who were religious leaders were more interested in obedience to outward forms of ritual and adherence to the cultural mores of the time rather than to the excluded classes of people considered impure. He asked, "Do you have eyes but fail to see and ears but fail to hear?" (Mark 8:18).

It seems at this time of increasing polarization and hatred that we need to take seriously the gift of Incarnation this Christmas. Christmas is so much more than a consumer's holiday. It is a reminder than we are at our deepest core children of God, sharing God's life. And we are to live out of that belief and reality.

Perhaps the reality to live as Jesus taught us is just too unbearable, and so we have frozen Incarnation into a moment in time — the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. A beautiful story that is appropriate for early stages of our life, but not a helpful story as we become adults and have to take seriously living the Gospel here and now.

I recently saw two movies that offered me a glimpse of the ongoing reality of the Incarnation. Two people who in their time lived out of their deepest self, their God self, and in doing so embodied love and gave it away.

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The first is "Harriet." It is about Harriet Tubman, escaped slave, abolitionist and political activist. She is known for having returned some 13 times over her own perilous escape route to rescue other slaves. She is depicted as someone with a very

special relationship to God who had dreams and saw visions. She believed they were revelations from God, and this deep belief allowed her to "see" in new ways. Harriet opened herself to another dimension of knowing and followed where she believed God was telling her to go.

Alone, she escaped from her master's house and arrived in Philadelphia, where she met leaders of the Underground Railroad. At a meeting when the next escapes were being discussed, no one believed that the route she had taken was possible. It was too dangerous. The only woman present, Harriet stepped forth and said she would go.

Harriet understood who she was in her deepest self. Fear was not going to stop her, nor was the need for affirmation of those with whom she was working. She was to bring her family and other slaves to freedom.

Harriet Tubman embodied Love Incarnate for me. She allowed herself to fall deeply into the mystery of God, where she discovered her true self. Without thinking of her own safety or any personal gain, Harriet dedicated her life to freeing those enslaved. She only had to appear in the fields, and people trusted and followed her to freedom.

The second film is "A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood." It is based on a true story of an *Esquire* magazine writer's friendship with Fred Rogers, on whom he was doing a profile.

Not having grown up with "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," I was intrigued when I saw the documentary about him earlier this year. Here was a man who took serious issues — self-worth, divorce, death, racism — and communicated ways of approaching these realities to children. In the current movie, the viewer experiences the power his approach had not only on children but also on adults.

It is clear that he loved people unconditionally. He would wait and listen to the other even when the other might be disagreeable or hostile. He believed in the basic goodness of each person regardless of race, creed or nationality. He understood that hardship, illness, and physical or psychological challenges could be moments of growth for a person and that God was very near to them. The songs he wrote for the program throughout its 33-year run spoke to the goodness of each person. To love yourself just as you are, not as you will be or whom culture says you should be. You

are from the very beginning, a child of God sharing in Divine life.

Rogers' wife, when asked if Fred was a saint, replied in the negative. If he was a saint, then people would use it as an excuse not to be like him. This sounds similar to what we have done with Jesus so that we wouldn't have to take his message seriously.

What do I learn from Harriet Tubman and Fred Rogers for where we are today? From Harriet, I see the possibility that people can change. Harriet was able to shift the worldview prevalent in her time, the way of seeing the world and one's role in it. Through her own suffering and that of her family and fellow slaves, she shifted how she understood her plight. She realized that she was a child of God and that all are meant to be free to live their life to their fullest. With a pure heart, without concern for herself or any external rewards, she rejected fear and worked selflessly to free others. Her anger was transformed into action, and even when she had the opportunity to inflict harm, she never sought revenge.

From Fred Rogers, I hear the transforming power of silence and space that welcome and listen to the other. He took time to hear whatever the child or the adult needed to share. Often, it was something just coming to consciousness. I imagine him sitting with some of our elected officials and creating a space for them to let go of their image and expected behavior, and in that time to begin to get unstuck from the absolute position they are defending.

Harriet Tubman and Fred Rogers understood the Incarnation and lived it.

As 2020 begins, we are invited to live the Incarnation. We are so in need of people like you and me, average persons, who will not let fear of the other control them, who will not forget that all sentient and nonsentient beings are interconnected, who believe that people are good and are in need of respect, who are willing to listen so as to hear and to acknowledge our blindness so as to see.

May this Christmas not end on Dec. 26 but live within us, manifesting itself through us each "beautiful day in the neighborhood."

[Nancy Sylvester is founder and director of the Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue. She served in leadership of her own religious community, the Sister Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Monroe, Michigan, as well as in the presidency of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. Prior to that she was National Coordinator of Network, the national Catholic social justice

lobby. You may be interested in the current ICCD program, Enter the Chaos: Engage the Differences to Make a Difference. For information go to www.iccdinstitute.org.]