

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Here comes Jesus!

A layman friend of mine was drafted to help with Vacation Bible School at his church last summer. All week the children were to pretend that they lived in first-century Palestine, and my friend's assignment was to be Jesus.



As you can imagine, he was uneasy about accepting that role. He's not an actor or a Bible expert, and of course like the rest of us he's not perfect. He didn't think he could be a very convincing Jesus. But the director of Vacation Bible School was a good friend, and he hated to say no to her, so he said okay.

Being Jesus is scary

His first challenge was getting dressed. He says that when he got all rigged up in his draped headpiece, long robe, and sandals he felt like a cross between Yasir Arafat and Lawrence of Arabia. But evidently he looked fine to the children, because as soon as he entered their room a child shouted, "Here comes Jesus!" and the others quickly joined in—"Here comes Jesus!" "Here comes Jesus!"



My friend realized that to the children he really did seem to be Jesus. That was scary. They asked him some questions that he had a hard time coming up with spur-of-the-moment answers for. He managed, however, and he kept being Jesus all week. It was a powerful experience.

God asks us to be Jesus

God asks all of us to be Jesus, all the time. As the church, we are the body of Christ. Individually and as a group we're supposed to be

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.
—1 Corinthians 12:27

(continued on page 2)

Jesus keeps coming

Receiving Jesus Christ isn't a once-and-for-all step. It includes continually responding to Jesus's continuing invitation to follow him more closely. It means continuing to discover more of God.



I like the way Keith Miller and Bruce Larson describe the process in their book *The Edge of Adventure*. They say that Christian commitment involves giving as much of yourself as you can, to as much of God as you can grasp. This implies that over time you can keep discovering more of God and more of yourself, and you can keep becoming able to give more of yourself to God.

Learning about Jesus's birth and celebrating it at Christmas doesn't give us the whole picture. Christ is still alive. Christ keeps coming into the world and into our individual lives in new ways, and God keeps asking for new responses from us as we grow in our faith.



Christ's coming often happens in unexpected ways, just as it did when Jesus was born to a young peasant woman in a stable. Christ sometimes appears in places that we don't consider appropriate. And Christ sometimes comes to people that we consider undeserving.

The Advent season is a good time for taking fresh notice of the Christ who is in our midst today. It's a good time for asking what God wants done today in the church and in the world, and for helping it to happen.



**O holy Child of Bethlehem,
descend to us we pray;
cast out our sin, and enter in,
be born in us today.**

**We hear the Christmas angels
the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
our Lord Emmanuel!**



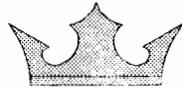
(Here comes Jesus, from page 1)

Anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He [or she] will do even greater things ...
—John 14:12

doing the kinds of things in today's world that Jesus did in his world during his earthly life. In fact, one of the Gospels quotes Jesus as saying that his followers would do even more.

Robes and sandals won't work today

Being Jesus in today's world rarely requires dressing up like my friend had to. In fact, we often keep people from taking Jesus seriously because we insist on dressing his teaching in outdated clothes. To state our beliefs we use antiquated words. To express the Gospel in music we use 19th-century hymns. We describe Jesus and God by comparing them to shepherds, feudal lords, and all-powerful kings that aren't part of many people's experience today.



Jesus might wear jeans and a T-shirt

On the basis of what we know about Jesus's earthly life and ministry, we can make some good guesses about what he would do if he were living in the U.S. today. He might be born to an unmarried teenage welfare recipient. As an adult he'd probably wear jeans and a T-shirt. He would probably spend most of his time in places like shopping malls and schools and office buildings and hospitals and factories. He'd undoubtedly spend time in ordinary people's homes, too.



If Jesus were here today he would probably go to some parties. He'd probably talk with people in bars. He'd talk to street people that most of us



shun. These are today's equivalent of what the Bible describes him doing.

New descriptions of God

Today's Jesus might describe God by telling a story that showed God in the role of the CEO of a

big corporation. To show how God searches for us, Jesus might portray God as a woman looking for a dropped contact lens or for a file she had lost in her computer.



Many of us cringe at the idea of Jesus or God doing such things. They're so ordinary. They don't seem religious enough. But according to the Gospels Jesus did the ordinary, human things that ordinary people did, and he described God in terms of the people and experiences that were part of everyday life.

What Jesus didn't do is important, too. He didn't urge people to attend religious ceremonies, or to behave in genteel ways, or to have a conventional family, yet we often claim those are requirements for being a Christian.

We've glamorized the story

We've glamorized and sanitized the Jesus story over the centuries. We picture Mary as a 20-something blonde wearing a blue satin dress and a halo, yet this doesn't match what we know about her. We portray Christ doing only things that are foreign to life today, yet we claim to believe that Christ is now alive in today's world.



By keeping Christ in a glamorized first-century Palestine, we deny what we claim to believe about the incarnation. We make the Gospel seem unbelievable. We make it seem unrelated to today's people's real lives and problems. We make people think the church has nothing to say that's worth listening to. We misrepresent the Gospel message. ❖

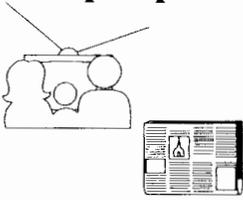
Joy to the World

Joy to the world,
the Lord is
come!

Let earth receive
her King.

Let every heart prepare him room,
and heaven and nature sing.

Do people see Jesus in us?



When people hear about your congregation on the local grapevine, do they hear the message of Jesus? When they see news about your denomination or about members of your church in the newspapers or on TV, do they see Jesus?

What about when they see you at school, or hear you talking with fellow employees at the office? Do your golfing buddies see Jesus when they see you on the golf course? When friends are with you at a football game, are they likely to think "Here comes Jesus"? They need to. Seeing us going about our everyday lives is the only way in which many of our co-workers and family members and fellow citizens—even our fellow church members—will ever see Jesus.



You are the light of the world ... Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to [God] ...

—Matthew 5:14, 16

We need to tell about Jesus and God in ways that today's people can hear and recognize as valuable. We need to act like Jesus in ways that are not only recognizable but also appealing.

We're afraid of not being liked

Of course, we don't always want our friends to see Jesus in us. We know that Jesus should be our model, but we sometimes think of him as the goody-goody, wet-blanket kind of person that no one wants to have around. We assume that acting like Jesus would make us unlikeable.

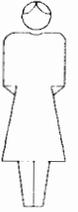


For many years I had that mistaken idea. When I was a teenager, speakers at church were always urging us to give our lives to what they called "full-time Christian service," and I thought that was what being the best possible Christian required. For boys it meant becoming clergy (an all-male occupation then), and for girls it meant becom-



ing some other kind of church employee— maybe even a missionary.

Most of the female church employees that I happened to know at that time were unmarried. They never wore makeup or flattering hairstyles, and their standard costume was a dark crepe dress and clunky black "sensible shoes." On the surface they were very unattractive to me, and I only saw the surface.



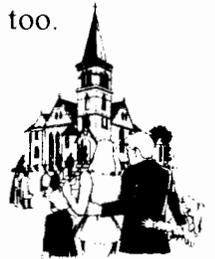
Outer Mongolia? No way!

I didn't know any missionaries, but I pictured them as people I definitely didn't want to be like. I assumed they were sent to awful, remote, uncivilized places like Outer Mongolia, and I couldn't imagine going to such a place.

If this was the ultimate in Christian commitment, as I mistakenly thought it was, I knew I wasn't interested. I wasn't leading anything remotely resembling a wild life, and my appearance wasn't much, but I couldn't imagine having to become like the female church employees I saw. Going to Sunday School and church regularly was fine but it was quite enough for me. I noticed that it evidently was for most people I knew, too.

Jesus brings true joy

Because of our inaccurate mental pictures of what being a total follower of Jesus means, many of us have convinced ourselves that conventional participation in the traditional activities of a church congregation is all that's reasonable to expect. We therefore content ourselves with merely going to worship services on Sunday mornings and being in Sunday School classes and having jobs in the church organizational structure if we're willing to do more. We're shocked if anyone expects us to do anything different from this conventional church participation, yet what Jesus did was *very* different.



Although Jesus made people see some of their sinful behavior that they didn't want to have to see, and that didn't make everyone like him, he also showed people a new way of life that was better than anything they had previously imagined. His way didn't take the joy out of life. It put true joy into life. It was good news, not bad news. It still is.

What would you have to do in order for people to think, "Here comes Jesus!" when they saw you? What would our churches have to do differently? Advent is an especially good time for all of us to reconsider those questions. ❖

Barbara



Next month . . .

Being the church means being a community

If you've just discovered *Connections*

and you want to start receiving it monthly, send your name, mailing address, and a \$5 check to cover printing and postage for the coming year's issues, to me at the address below. If you want back issues, let me know, and include \$5 for each year you want. Two years' back issues are available. For more information, write me or phone 817-773-2625.

I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and *Connections* is a one-person volunteer ministry. In it I am speaking only for myself, not for any institution or group.



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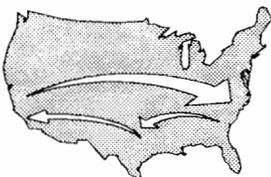


Here comes Jesus!

Surprising connections



A man I didn't know phoned me recently from Wisconsin. For years he has taught college classes about dreams. A student in one of his current classes gave him a copy of the October 1994 issue of *Connections*, about dreams. He liked it and wanted to make copies for all his classes. He asked about my background and about *Connections*. As a result of our conversation he wanted all the back issues and a copy of my book *God's Partners*. He isn't in a church, so I wasn't sure they would interest him, but he has now read them all and liked them. He's on the *Connections* mailing list now, and I feel that I have a new friend.



A letter came recently from an author and radio commentator in Virginia. He had received the back issues of *Connections* from a friend in California to whom I had sent them at the request of a friend of mine in Temple. The Virginian enclosed a cassette tape of a radio talk show he had done. From reading the issues of *Connections* he had received, he had seen that we were on the same wavelength, so he thought I'd be interested in what he was saying. I was. I'm now looking forward to reading some of what he's written and to hearing more about his spiritual journey.

Connections is making surprising connections.