The infant mortality rate in the first century Roman Empire was about 30%. Nearly a third of all babies died before the age of 1. Compare that to Canada in 2016, where the infant mortality rate is less than half of a percent (0.46%). Being born was risky business.

The gospel stories describe Mary’s pregnancy and delivery as more complicated than most. She was young and unmarried, facing the stress of possible rejection from her family and community. There was the long journey in the final week of her pregnancy, by donkey. I can only imagine how that conversation went, when Joseph told her of the emperor’s decree—well, honey, you’ve always said you wanted to travel… And then no room at the inn, and only a cold, dark barn with the animals for a delivery room.

I’ve often thought about how difficult that journey was for Mary and Joseph, how harsh and exhausting the labor and delivery would have been. But I don’t often think about how dangerous it actually was. So much could have gone wrong, for the mother and for the baby. The probability of death for one or both was quite high.

Many of the gospel stories talk about Jesus’ power, how he walked on water and multiplied food and controlled the wind and the waves with his voice. And so sometimes we picture Jesus like a comic book superhero, all strength and healing and invincibility.

But that picture isn’t quite accurate. In most of the gospel stories, Jesus is very much a man. He gets thirsty and hungry. He gets tired after a long walk. When he went on a 40 day fast in the wilderness, he became famished and weak. He hides from a crowd that wants to stone him.

When Jesus was a toddler, his father received a warning that King Herod wanted to destroy this newborn king that foreigners had come to worship. So Mary and Joseph fled the country, took Jesus to live in the refuge of Egypt until Herod died and the threat passed.

Central to the theology of the Incarnation is Jesus’ vulnerability. He did great deeds, mighty signs of God’s power, yes. But he was also weak, exposed, and at some points, defenseless.

What kind of God brings salvation to the world by becoming helpless, tiny, human?

(female voice from the crowd:)
Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

The words of the prophet Isaiah:

In days to come
the mountain of the Lord’s house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.
Many peoples shall come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

Familiar words to us. And for the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, that was the vision for their people back to the days of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. “I will make of you a great nation,” God covenanted with Abraham, “and all peoples of the earth will be blessed through you.”

That was the beginning, the promise of what God was planning for God’s People. And the Mountain of God was the end, with all people aligning themselves in the Peaceful Kingdom built on the Wisdom of God. That’s still the vision of the end of the story for Christians, “on earth as it is in Heaven.”

The question was, and is, how do we get there from here? We’ve always known the great distance between the way things are and the way things God wants things to be. And we’ve always known that the People of God have some part to play in bringing about God’s dream. But what does that look like? What path must we walk to join God’s kingdom come?

(female voice from the crowd:)
Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.
Though he was in the form of God,
he did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited.

Most of the Old Testament story is of Israel pursuing this vision of peace through Domination. The Hebrew tribes entered the Promised Land confident of God’s blessing, pushed aside the weaker inhabitants, and fought to protect their religious, social, and political identity against rival nations. The tribes united behind the military leadership of King Saul, and then King David expanded their borders and earned Israel a place of respect among the powerful kingdoms of their age.

These were violent days, but the goal was peace. The biblical writers describe their wars as ordained by God, for Israel saw its struggle for power as God’s path to this peaceful world. By increasing their power and influence as a nation, God would be lifted up so that all other nations would know God through Israel.

That was the plan. But even King David had misgivings about this violence done in the name of God. When the time came to build a Temple for God, the central piece of this Mountain of God vision, David declined to build it himself. He had too much blood on his hands, he said. This sacred work should be left to his son, Solomon, to create a buffer between the violence of David’s empire-building and the peaceful reign of King Solomon. It’s curious that the Warrior God of Israel would not allow a warrior to build his Temple.

King Solomon did build the Temple, and for one brief generation, the nations did stream to Jerusalem to see the glories of Israel’s kingdom. They seemed to be more interested in Israel’s wealth than Israel’s God, however, and rather than drawing the nations to worship God, Solomon allowed himself to be influenced by the gods and women of other nations.

Following Solomon’s death, Israel crumbled into warring factions and spent the next three centuries in decline under various kings who tried with less success to bring back the dominance of King David’s monarchy. Until the Assyrian Empire annihilated the kingdom of Israel and the Babylonian Empire carried off the remaining tribe of Judah into Exile.

The path of domination through violence failed to bring about God’s Peace.

And yet, it was in this time of Exile that Isaiah’s prophecy of the Mountain of God rang out. The Mountain of God, God’s Peace, was yet to come.

(female voice from the crowd:)
Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.
Though he was in the form of God,
he did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited.
Instead, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

Not every story of Israel is about Domination or Purity, however. Another thread runs through the Old Testament, a thread that suggests God might be up to something entirely different as the path to the Mountain of God.

One example is the story of Gideon. Gideon lived before the monarchy, in the time when Israel was led by “judges” that would emerge to unite the tribes in times of need. In Gideon’s day, Israel was occupied by the forces of Midian, so the Israelites survived by hiding out in hidden valleys and caves, planting and harvesting their crops in secret.

One day, Gideon was hiding, quietly threshing wheat in a winepress, when an angel appeared and told Gideon that he was to lead Israel out of the oppression of the Midianites. Gideon scoffed, claiming that he was weak, his family was weak, and his tribe was weak. Even his faith was weak. Gideon demanded three different signs from the angel as proof that God would be with him.

In spite of his weakness, God was with him. Gideon summoned the soldiers of Israel, and 32,000 showed up. A mighty army, ready to fight for the glory of God and Israel. But God told Gideon that there were too many soldiers for God’s plan, so Gideon told those who were afraid to go home. A third of the soldiers left, but God again said that the army was too large. So Gideon sent home even more soldiers, until only 300 remained.

Three hundred against tens of thousands of Midianites. But God had a plan. God had Gideon arm each of his 300 with a trumpet and a torch, with a clay jars as a cover for the torch. During the night, Gideon’s men divided into groups that went to the hills surrounding the Midianite army. At Gideon’s signal, each soldier smashed his clay jar, held up his torch, and blew his trumpet. The Midianites ran out of their tens, saw that they were surrounded, and panicked. In the chaos, they fought each other, until those that remained fled in a terrified retreat.

This story raises some interesting questions about what God was up to in ancient Israel. Perhaps it’s simply a reminder to Israel that God is trustworthy, that God is on their side and would fight their battles. Or maybe this story points to something deeper, that God was not as dependent on the military program of Israel as they thought, that their soldiers and weapons had more to do with their insecurity and lack of faith than the command of God?

Either way, this is a story of God choosing the few instead of the many, of God inviting faith rather than force.

And this story is not alone. This thread of God working through weakness shows up in the story of Jacob and Esau, when the younger, weaker brother marches his family and then himself undefended into the camp of his massive, irate older brother. It’s there in the story of Esther, who risks her life going uninvited into the presence of the Emperor. It’s there in the story of David himself, chosen to be king out of the weakest tribe, over the more obvious choices of his older, more distinguished brothers. The list of examples of God working through vulnerability is long: Hannah, Jonah, Rahab, Ruth, Hagar, Tamar, Joseph, Hosea, Moses…

Over and over, God shows up not with the many, but with the few. Not with the strong, but in the weak. Not through purity, but in passion. Not through domination, but through vulnerability.

(female voice from the crowd:)

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.
Though he was in the form of God,
he did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited.
Instead, he emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself.
The Christmas story stands in this tradition of vulnerability. For centuries, the People of God waited for a saviour, for God to show up and bring justice and peace. But when God did show up, God came in weakness, in limitation, in risk.

God showed up through a young woman, of questionable sexual conduct. A common carpenter, respected, but altogether ordinary. And a baby. An actual, real-world baby, with a tenuous grip on life. A physical, substantial life, with family and friends and adversaries and temptations and tears.

A life that would declare that the Kingdom of God was not just a vision for the future, but a reality close at hand. A life that would teach his followers to turn the other cheek, to love their enemies, to deny themselves and take up the cross. A life that would indeed take up his own cross, to be broken and poured out for the good of all.

As with Gideon, God had other options. There were mighty rulers in the world, men of great strength and status, empires that spread across the world. God could have used their dominance to bring about the peaceful Kingdom. But instead, God chose a backwater people, an ordinary couple, a defenseless baby, a life of vulnerability and sacrifice.

(female voice from the crowd:)
Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.
Though he was in the form of God,
he did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited.
Instead, he emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

Let this same mind be in you… To which voice will we listen? For there are those voices, out there (in the world) and in here (within us), which tell us that peace will come if we can just win this next battle. That strength will save us, if we can just get power into the right hands. That we must fight against evil, or else evil will prevail.

And there are voices, out there and in here, that warn against trusting that other person. That I need to control the relationship. That it’s more important to be right than to be forgiving. That I dare not be honest with my emotions and fears. That if I show weakness, I won’t get what I need.

And then there’s the voice of Jesus, the Word of God in human form, calling us to follow in the path of peace. Calling us to trust and to serve. Calling us to lay down our lives.

(female voice from the crowd:)
Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.
Though he was in the form of God,
he did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited.
Instead, he emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

Amen.