

# LIGHT REFLECTIONS

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## Immanuel

The BYU-East Carolina football game on October 28 found my wife, Lia, and me watching from two very different angles. During the first half, we sat close to midfield near the top of the western bleachers. We enjoyed a bird's-eye view of the game, which facilitated my penchant for playing armchair offensive (and defensive) coordinator. When things didn't go well, I was sure that I could diagnose the problem. I found myself grumbling about missed tackles, blown coverages, faulty reads, imprudent play calls, and more besides.

At halftime, a friend invited us to join him on the front row of the eastern bleachers—near the forty-yard line, just behind the BYU bench. The move transformed our view of the game, which was now much more immediate, but also obscured by masses of athletes colliding in the trenches. We could sense something of the bewildering speed and disorienting confusion of Division 1 college football viewed from Ground Zero.

In some respects, we could see much less; in others, however, we could see much more. We could now see directly into our players' faces—their face paint smeared, their jawbones streaked with sweat. We could see their grit, their resolve, and their almost overwhelming fatigue.

Our hearts went out to these young athletes. We could appreciate how much they were giving and how hard they were trying. We felt at least some measure of empathy. I started to do a lot more cheering and a lot less grumbling. Although the game ended in a disappointing loss, we were very proud of our team. And I had learned anew a critical lesson: things—and especially people—look very different when you get closer to them.

In a BYU forum message four years ago, Bryan Stevenson implored us to “get more proximate to those who are neglected and living in the margins.” “There is power,” Stevenson said, “in proximity.”<sup>1</sup> In a similar vein, President Worthen has extolled the virtues of “propinquity.”<sup>2</sup>

These are powerful lessons at all times, especially for faculty with respect to our students. With Christmas approaching, they wield a special potency.

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“And they shall call his name Immanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us” (Matt. 1:23; see also Isaiah 7:14).

Some of the ancient prophets seem to have been almost staggered by the substance of their own prophecies. “God himself,” Abinadi proclaimed, echoing others, “[w]ould come down among the children of men, and take upon him the form of man, and go forth in mighty power upon the face of the earth” (Mosiah 13:34). King Benjamin marveled that the coming Messiah was to be the very “Lord Omnipotent, who reigneth, who was, and is from all eternity to all eternity,” and that He would come as an infant, clothed “in a tabernacle of clay” (Mosiah 3:5).

He came with a particular mission—to preach the gospel, work miracles, and establish His church; to conquer sin, slay death, and harrow hell. But He also came, in crucial part, to perfect His cosmic empathy—to experience firsthand the full gamut of human experience; to feel our wounds in His own flesh, to bear our griefs in His pure soul. Because “the Spirit knoweth all things,” He could have learned about human experience by revelation. But He chose instead to learn

“according to the flesh how to succor his people [in] their infirmities” (Alma 7:13, 12).<sup>3</sup>

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When Nephi asked an angel what the tree of life meant, he was answered with a vision of the Lamb of God, as a baby, wrapped in His mother’s arms. Without further explanation, the angel then inquired whether Nephi now understood “the meaning of the tree.” Nephi responded without hesitation. “Yea,” he said, “it is the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men” (1 Ne. 11:20-23).

To me, nothing signals that love more effulgently, nor proclaims it more powerfully, than the mortal condescension of God’s Only Begotten Son. With a proximity more intimate and a propinquity more exquisite than we can ever

imagine, He remains “the great King Immanuel”<sup>4</sup>—God with us, indeed.

*Tiny in this manger laid—  
Hands that very worlds have made,  
Hands that stars have rich arrayed,  
Grasp a mother’s thumb.*

*Wrapped within this makeshift bed—  
Feet that, as the prophets said,  
Feet to crush the serpent’s head  
Nestle in the straw.*

*Hail the Virgin, meek and mild,  
Hail her sovereign, sacred Child,  
Holy, harmless, undefiled,  
True Man, yet very God.<sup>5</sup>*

Merry Christmas.

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<sup>1</sup> Bryan Stevenson, “Creating Justice,” BYU Forum, October 30, 2018, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/bryan-stevenson/creating-justice/>. Dean Gordon Smith has repeatedly echoed this counsel in messages to the BYU Law community.

<sup>2</sup> Kevin J Worthen, “The Propinquity Effect,” BYU Commencement address, April 21, 2022, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/kevin-j-worthen/the-propinquity-effect/>.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Henry B. Eyring, “Adversity,” *Ensign*, May 2009 (“He could have known how to succor us simply by revelation, but He chose to learn by His own personal experience.”).

<sup>4</sup> “The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles,” January 1, 2000, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/the-living-christ-the-testimony-of-the-apostles/the-living-christ-the-testimony-of-the-apostles?lang=eng>.

<sup>5</sup> Justin Collings, “Nativity” (unpublished). I wrote these verses on Christmas Eve 2016, inspired by Dennis Rasmussen, *The Lord’s Question: A Call to Come Unto Him* (Keter Foundation, 1985) 60-61 (“In the darkness of Bethlehem the omnipotent God became an impotent Baby. The hands that made the world and hung the stars in the sky were now just large enough to grasp a mother’s finger. . . . The tiny foot that one day would crush the serpent’s head was already nestled in the straw.”).