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## The Incarnational Point of View

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# The Incarnational Point of View

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## The Incarnational Point of View

“Say you have a special child.” So begins Mark Richard’s *House of Prayer No. 2*, a memoir that travels the South of Richard’s youth with breakneck speed, from old Civil War battlegrounds to special children’s hospitals to Wanchese scallop boats to New York City and back to a small black Baptist church in North Carolina. It’s a book I read with my creative nonfiction writers to get them to think about the arc of their faith but also to play with point of view.

Richard uses a sort of limited-omniscient-shifting-camera-second-person, I tell my students, as evidenced by the first line. “Say you have a special child,” technically puts us somewhere in league with Richard’s parents looking in on himself. Twenty-six pages later, Richard shifts the camera more permanently to his own perspective when he reprises the first line, “Say you are the special child.” But as late as 120 pages in, Richard is still moving over to empathize with his father, one of the antagonists of the book. “It wasn’t easy being your father,” he thinks. “A perfectionist with an imperfect child, a son who avoided you, a son who would have preferred to live across the street at the Baptist parsonage.” In short, Richard’s voice is elastic and gracious.

Try beginning like Richard does, I tell my students, “Say you’re \_\_\_\_\_,” and then just go.

This terrifies them. In fact, this year they came up after class to double-check that it was okay. “Can we really do that?” they asked. Then they tried it and love it. “This is changing the way I write for other classes,” they said, not without some trepidation.

I tell them it’s all about point of view; point of view is everything. Then I think, is it really?

But the Christmas story confirms that it is. While John may be the most experimental of the gospel writers, both Matthew and Luke’s cameras move pretty fast—nearly all the way to second person perspective.

After a Greek chorus of genealogy, Matthew's camera comes up on the Jewish male lead. "Say you're Joseph," you can imagine Matthew beginning. "Say you're in the lineage of David but from backwater Nazareth. Say you've established yourself, and you've found a wife from a good family. But say her people come to you and tell you she's pregnant."

Likewise Luke, who runs closer to Mary's point of view: "Say the government issues an ironclad decree that means you have to travel 70 miles by donkey in your last trimester. . . Say you give birth to the son of God and lay him in a manger."

Then Luke jump cuts to the pastures around Bethlehem. "Say you're a shepherd living out in the fields nearby. Say it's cold and you're drowsing as the fire burns down..."

Matthew's jump cut is even more improbable: "Say you're a Magi from the East. Say you've seen a star arise and so you leave on a journey following it. Say you travel across the desert for weeks, months, and you think, 'Well, they must know about the birth of this King in the royal palace.' But once you speak to the king there, you realize your mistake, that you're on the verge of raising a civil war, that you've kicked up a small genocide."

One of the most astounding things about scripture is God's mad respect for the integrity of point of view. He'll let you follow your own path. Frighteningly so. What is the Old Testament but God jumping up and down, stamping his feet and waving his arms to say, "People, people, over here! Can't you see what you're doing? Will you please see things from my perspective!?" Rarely, does he commandeer anyone's mind. Oh, we're quick to note the invasions—unchosen Esau, hardened Pharaoh, rejected Saul—but think of the long couch session with Moses at the burning bush, think of the petty laughter of old people at conceiving (*that* little snap-of-the finger trick when you hung the stars in space at a Word?).

Or think of the tenderness with Mary at the annunciation: the absurd salutation that troubles her, the breakneck pace of the announcement ("Okay, what?"), her simple request as to the mechanics of it all—this is the crisis, the mulling over (the respect of that!)—and then her gentle affirmation.

Yes, of course it's true. God is the ultimate respecter of persons, as well as the master of shifting camera point of view.

It's called incarnation.

Think of the gospel of John. "Say you're the Word spoken before all words; say you're the Word sustaining all creation. Say you're in heaven with the new pop-up tent God gave you, and he gets a crazy idea and says, 'How 'bout you go pitch your tent with those my special children?'"