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If this, then that – John 1 – Christmas Eve 2015

God is so huge in the Hebrew Scriptures. God creates the universe, sends plagues on people, parts the sea, displaces peoples, generally rules with a pretty heavy hand. God did a lot with great huge exercises of power.

And then came a time when God seemed to back away. These enormous, overwhelming displays of divine might just didn't happen like they used to.

But that didn't mean that God had lost interest in humankind, or given up on our perversely rebellious ways: God had other plans.

And those plans are why we are here tonight. Because instead of making grand statements on an enormous scale, God became subtle. So we have the startling spectacle of God no longer smiting the earth in wrath, but arriving to change the world as a person, one of us.

This is hard for us to get our minds around. Always has been. We want to see the big, literally earth-shattering stuff – acts of God, as the

insurance industry calls them. That's how God's supposed to act. I mean, what's the point of having all that power if you don't use it?

But God isn't like that. God isn't interested in forcing us to obedience through fear and destruction and horrific punishments – God knows, like any parent, that enforced obedience ends up causing surreptitious rebellion, and since God's way is to bring life and not compel behavior, changing our ways through changing our attitudes, God became subtle. Subtle as a tiny infant.

We find ourselves in a time where things are seen as the consequence of other things. While that may be true in some cases, it doesn't allow for God to exert his subtle influence – and sometimes, as in the logical fallacy *post hoc ergo propter hoc* (after that because of that), we get caught thinking that all our actions lead to the next step, and that God has withdrawn to the simple tasks of finding us parking spaces and curing our colds.

In fact, God is at work, silently and powerfully, in all that surrounds us.

This is caught so beautifully in an ancient English Christmas carol. In the medieval world, people used simple stories to tell the stories of scripture, to fill in the spaces that they were curious about but had no way of finding more out from Scripture.

So, here's the plot of the Cherry Tree Carol. Mary and Joseph are sitting under a cherry tree before their marriage. Mary says to Joseph, in the most humble and gentle way possible, "please pick me some cherries, for I am with child." Joseph, as we all expect, is not pleased at this request, especially since this is the first he's heard of her pregnancy, and he leaps to what for us is a straightforward conclusion: Mary's been with another man.

So, in reply to her request, he tells her to get the father of the unborn child to get her cherries for her.

And then, we realize how our own sense of cause and effect can go awry in the face of the subtle power of God: Joseph, having told Mary to let the father of her unborn child get her her cherries, watches as the tree branch itself bends down so that she can pick them without effort. For God, the maker and master of the tree, is also the father of the child, Jesus.

How often do we miss God's working subtly among us because we think it can't happen, won't happen, or was simply cause and effect.

Joseph was right – every baby has a father – but he wasn't ready for the subtle God who worked a miracle through an infant.

Are you?