

A Christmas Message

Christmas is one of the most widely celebrated holidays on the planet, celebrated by over 2.5 billion people. Although traditionally a Christian holiday, Christmas is widely celebrated by many non-Christians as well. A modern day Christmas comes with a lot of tradition and surrounded by commercialism. But somewhere buried in traditions and all of the hustle and bustle of the season is its real meaning. Even those of us who hold to the Christian faith often lose sight of the real meaning. In the middle of gift-buying, putting up the tree, decorating, visiting friends and family we ought to stop and ask ourselves what is Christmas all about.

Some would simply say that it was a child named Jesus who was born in a manger 2000 years ago. But then, how does it apply to me? And how does it matter to me? I'm sure some of you would say that of course the child was our Savior, who would later die for our sins. True, but even this doesn't go quite far enough. Even though we may agree to the fact that Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Christ, we still often fail to grasp the significance of that event both for the whole world and for our individual lives.

To really answer the question – what is the real meaning of Christmas to us we should have a look at the first Christmas and what we can learn from it.

Jesus' Birth Announcement:

And the angel said to the shepherds, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:10-12)

Familiar verses, aren't they? So familiar, in fact, that it is easy to miss just how remarkable they are...

Fear not...

I bring you good news...

A Savior is born...

He's lying in a manger...

The birth of Jesus is not the way we would have planned it. No person, however poor, should have to be born in a stable. No delivery room, no doctor. Hay on the floor, animals all around. And the smell! The mess! This is no place for a royal birth. The reality of the first Christmas is far from the rosy pictures you find on Christmas cards today!

But God sees things differently. He chose a manger over a mansion. He picked a carpenter over a king. He designed a quiet coming over a worldwide celebration. Why would God, the Creator of heaven and earth, send his Son to be born in such a lowly place?

Perhaps Jesus was born in a stable to give hope to all whose lives look like one. We sure do make a mess of things. Sometimes our actions stink. And though we try to make the best of it, the winter wind still sneaks into the corners of our lives, and the nights get cold and dark.

Too many days too far from God? Too many years too hard on others? Too much mess? God knows...and he has some amazing words for us.

I bring you good news...

I'll give you great joy...

I sent a Savior...

What We Can Learn About God From Christmas:

To use the words of Dallas Willard, to many people, God is like "an unblinking cosmic stare." We pray and nothing happens. We suffer and God is silent – a cosmic, unblinking stare.

Well, Christmas changes all of that. Christmas shows to us that even though we can't reach God, God has reached us. God is not just staring at us in bewilderment. He reached us in the form of a baby.

One author, Philip Yancey, asks: "If Jesus came to reveal God to us, then what do I learn about God from that first Christmas?" He goes on to answer that question with the following words (partly adapted from the book *"The Jesus I Never Knew"*):

Humble.

Before Jesus, almost no author had used "humble" as a compliment. Yet the events of Christmas point inescapably to what seems like an oxymoron: a humble God. The God who came to earth came not in a raging whirlwind nor in a devouring fire. The Maker of all things became a tiny cell barely visible to the naked eye and was finally born in a stable and laid in a feed trough.

"Allahu Akbar (i.e. God is great), the cry of the Muslims, is a truth which needed no supernatural being to teach men," writes Father Neville Figgis. "That God is humble, that is the truth which Jesus taught man." The almighty God, who could

order armies and empires, chose to emerge in Palestine as a small baby, born in a shabby manger. This is how humble God is.

Going back to the announcement of Jesus' birth, to whom was it given? Outside Bethlehem the dark night sky grew luminous with thousands of angels. The special effects teams from Harry Potter or Lord of the Rings would have fallen dazzled before such a scene. Yet who saw and heard the angels? It was all for a few illiterate shepherds, peasants who watched the flocks of others, "nobodies" at the bottom of the social heap. Shepherds had such a reputation for being dirty and immoral that proper Jews lumped them together with the "godless" and restricted them to the outer courtyards of the temple. But yet it was they whom God selected to help celebrate the birth of his Son, the One who would be known as "the friend of sinners."

Approachable.

In most religious traditions, fear is the primary emotion when one approaches God. But at Christmas, God made a surprise appearance as a baby in a manger. What can be less scary than a newborn with his limbs wrapped tight against his body? In Jesus, God found a way of relating to human beings that did not involve fear.

Yancey says, "I learned about incarnation when I kept a salt-water aquarium. Management of a marine aquarium, I discovered, is no easy task. I had to run a portable chemical laboratory to monitor the nitrate levels and the ammonia content. I pumped in vitamins and antibiotics and sulfa drugs and enough enzymes to make a rock grow. I filtered the water through glass fibers and charcoal, and exposed it to ultraviolet light. You would think, in view of all the energy expended on their behalf, that my fish would at least be grateful. Not so. Every time my shadow loomed above the tank they dove for cover into the nearest shell. They showed me one "emotion" only: fear. Although I opened the lid and dropped food on a regular schedule, three times a day, they responded to each visit as a sure sign of my designs to torture them. I could not convince them of my true concern. To my fish I was deity. I was too large for them, my actions too incomprehensible. My acts of mercy they saw as cruelty; my attempts at healing they viewed as destruction. To change their perceptions, I began to see, would require a form of incarnation. I would have to become a fish and "speak" to them in a language they could understand."

A human being becoming a fish is nothing compared to God becoming a baby. And yet according to the Gospels that is what happened at Bethlehem. The God who created matter took shape within it, as an artist might become a spot on a painting

or a playwright a character within his own play. God wrote a story, only using real characters, on the pages of real history.

Underdog.

Yancey writes, "I wince even as I write the word, especially in connection with Jesus. It's a crude word, probably derived from dog-fighting and applied over time to predictable losers and victims of injustice. Yet as I read the birth stories about Jesus, I cannot help but conclude that though the world may be tilted toward the rich and the powerful, God is tilted toward the underdog. "He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty," said Mary in her Magnificat hymn."

Perhaps the best way to perceive the "underdog" nature of the incarnation is to transpose it into terms we can relate to today. An unwed mother, homeless, was forced to look for shelter while traveling to meet the heavy taxation demands of a colonial government. She lived in a land recovering from violent civil wars and still in turmoil — a situation much like that in modern Bosnia, Rwanda, or Somalia. Like half of all mothers who deliver today, she gave birth in Asia, in its far western corner, the part of the world that would prove least receptive to the son she bore. That son became a refugee in Africa, the continent where most refugees can still be found.

There's a place for the marginalized, the disenfranchised, the forgotten, the unemployed and the unemployable at Christmas.

So what is the Real Meaning of Christmas?

The true meaning of Christmas is not about *humans loving humans* or us giving gifts to each other. The true meaning of Christmas is about *God loving us*. It is about God giving the most amazing and spectacular gift:

The "cosmic unblinking stare" has entered human flesh, teaching us that God is humble, approachable and shows favor to the downtrodden and the oppressed, so you and I can embrace him without fear, knowing that we have a place in his story – we are accepted by Him through Jesus. That's what we got at Christmas. The "cosmic unblinking stare" became a loving smile.

Have a Blessed Christmas!

- Suman