

In the name of Jesus; Amen.

Marvel. Wonder. Magic. These are some words that probably describe how we experienced Christmas as children and what we want to try to capture as adults now. The sparkling lights at drive-throughs, shows, in our neighborhoods, on our houses and on our Christmas trees, these have the quality of transporting us to a little star-studded galaxy here on earth. The traditions, food, gathering, songs and carols all bring comfort from the past into the present. The nostalgia of memories from Christmas past are bittersweet.

But as you get older, the magic of Christmas isn't as poignant as it once was. Lights and decorations become a chore. You can't always eat with the freedom your younger appetite allowed you to. You have heard all the Christmas songs and carols before, over and over, many times. Siblings, children, parents, spouses, friends, and loved ones may not be around like they once were, having moved to another part of the country, distanced themselves from you, or died. That is one reason why children are such a blessing, and probably why Jesus the cute little baby is remembered more than Jesus the baby born to die for our sin: we get to see the wonder, marvel, magic, and joy in our children's and grandchildren's eyes, even as it fades from ours. We know that behind the festivities and cheer of Christmas there is work, planning, sadness, and loss. Time has a way of bringing reality to bear.

But that does not mean that adults are doomed to experience Christmas in decreasingly happy ways. It also doesn't mean that children have to enjoy the wonder and magic of Christmas in an unrealistic and sheltered way. What does the Word of our God say? "All those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them concerning this Child." There is marvel yet to be had this Christmastide for young and old alike.

When the joy of Christmas is tied not to a "what" but a "Who" it need not end. Christ the Savior is born and He is here to stay for us. He is our Emmanuel, our God with us. The joy of Christmas is that God became one of us, with all the sinews, muscles, organs, skin, hair, nails, mind and soul that we have. He takes on our flesh so that He might join Himself to us, that He might live the perfect life we should have before God and give it to you as if you had loved God and others perfectly all along. He joins Himself to us so that He might carry our sin that rightly separates us from God, becoming the numb, angry, disinterested, skeptical, dishonoring, lustful,

lying, jealous people we are and nailing it to the cross so that our sins do not stand against us and that need not be the way we live toward God and each other anymore. From heaven above to earth He comes, so that He might bring heaven to you, and show you that the gates stand wide open for those who believe, for those who have the eyes to see and the hearts to believe. It is a wonderful time of the year because God has made our sad, broken, and imperfect life, and even our very death, His own, and comes to change it for our salvation and good.

If you ask most people why they love Christmas so much, the first answer is usually not: “Because it is a time to remember and celebrate that Christ the Savior is born to save me from hell and the sin I have committed.” The answers usually have to do with the general vibe of the season, the family traditions and food and decorations. If Jesus is mentioned, it is usually an afterthought. The role Jesus takes for many Americans during the Christmas holidays is that He is just a cute little baby born to a sweet mother in a cozy little manger setting. Cuteness can coexist with Christmas cheer. But a Savior from sin? One who is born to die for the times I have hated others, thought petty thoughts and spoken dirty words, acted poorly toward my spouse, children, parents, and friends, despised God and didn’t listen to Him or read His Word or pray, for lusting after people beside my spouse, for not being content with what I have? Well, that’s just not a cheery message at all! If Jesus is to be part of Christmas, He gets whittled down into something He’s not, but is more palatable to more people: a mere baby. That’s all. The joy of Christmas will end promptly tomorrow evening, instead of extending the full 12 days of Christmas and on throughout the whole year because the way most Americans celebrate it, our Christmas cheer is tied to decorations and gatherings. When those are over, so is the joy. And the post-Christmas drop-off is a drag.

But that need not be for you, dear Christians. Like Mary, keep all these things and ponder them in your hearts the whole year through. The baby is not to be thrown out with the manger straw, or stuffed into the storage boxes. This root from Jesse’s stem will grow into the vine, that you might be nourished as the branches. The glory to God, the peace on earth, and the goodwill toward you is not a seasonal discount, but a forever, all-the-time promise etched into the very flesh of God who became one of us. In Christ, God is glorified as He reconciles the sinful world to Himself in the life and death of Jesus. In Christ, we have peace with God and each other, knowing that our sins are forgiven and we are set free to live better lives with one another. In

Christ, God turns a Father's heart to you, so that even in the midst of things we don't understand and suffering, we know He still loves us and is working all things out for our good.

The Christmas story from St. Luke is a heavenly, marvelous, joyful story. And it already has packed into it the preview of our salvation and Christ's work for you. Caesar Augustus ordered that the world be registered through a census. But it is Jesus, the true ruler and servant king of the house and lineage of David, who has a census of the saints, those whose names are written in the book of life, called out of this world to be citizens of heaven. Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem, the city of bread, and lay their baby in the feeding trough of animals, for He was born to be the bread of life. The swaddling cloths prepare the baby for death, wrapping Himself in our sins to be our Savior. They are the same cloths He will be wrapped in after His death, laid in the tomb after shedding His blood for us on the cross to pay for our sins. They are the same cloths He will fling aside when He rises again from the dead, opening heaven up for us, conquering death for you. The angels are sent to shepherds. It is because we are the sheep and He is the shepherd. He seeks out the lost and carries them to His church on His shoulders. He comes to bring together. He comes to save. He comes out of great love for you.

We are sinners who have not listened to God, or loved Him, or trusted Him as He created us to do. We may wonder at Him, we may scoff at Him, we may doubt Him, we may fail Him. But we need a Savior from the sin that separates us from God, and threatens us with hell. We need rescue from the brokenness and discontentment all around us. We need a Savior to come to us. And it is Christ the Lord.

The glory of God, the presence of Jesus, was not meant to be so wonderful that we could not possibly approach it, that it was only for a few special people. The glory of God is not for better Christians than the rest of us, or such a thing fades as time goes on and we get older. God came down into everything that was wrong with humanity, with broken and sinful human beings, because He was going to save us from the inside out. He was born in the middle of scandal, pushed out into the dark, surrounded by nobodies, so that He might show how God would save the world: by entering into our deepest depths of brokenness and sin, and carrying it for us. He came to earth to seek us out, to right what we cannot, to carry our sins, despairs, addictions, and failures where we would be crushed under them. He comes to the world in a humble birth, He will save the world by a humble death, for the wood of the manger is the wood of the cross. He was born to die, and by dying to bring to peace and forgiveness, to make you right with God. He

was born to change your manner of birth, so that you are not born into this world only to struggle and cry, sin and despair, wonder at God but not trust and love Him. He was born so that your days and relationships might be filled with His glory, peace, and goodwill. He was born to save you from eternal death, and to transform death into the portal of life eternal. He was born so that you might be born from above, and have love, joy, peace, hope.

Christmas might be more fun, or even easier to celebrate if Jesus was not part of the picture. We could be superficial Christians, taking in the sanitized Christmas story, but forgetting our sin and need for Jesus. We could read Luke's Christmas story next to Scrooge, or the Nutcracker, or other Christmas tales and say they all add to the magic of Christmas. But we won't ever be satisfied with Christmas or holidays unless we recognize the Christ in Christmas and the holy in the holidays. If Christmas is just about warm feelings and a cute baby, we rob ourselves of the greatest joy: peace and favor with God in Christ. Christmas is not about showing kindness and human solidarity once a year, but God's kindness and solidarity shown to us forever in Jesus. Christmas is not about coming to church one time a year to make God (or grandma) happy. It is all about seeing that Jesus is a gift for you the whole year long and all your life. Jesus 'Christmases' with us every Sunday and every day, when He speaks to us His Word in Scripture, where He gives us His body and blood, where we gather as His very body. The greatest gift is Jesus, who saves us from our sin, and offers to us heaven itself. Let us with Mary take it all to heart. Let us reflect on our sin. Let us seek out the Christ. Let us do more than come to Jesus with wonder. Let us come to Him with joy.

And this is the good news of great joy. Jesus comes for you, regardless of what you think of Him. We can't storm heaven with works or violence, sneak in, or smooth-talk the Lord: He comes for you. He brings heaven to you, openly and for all, with the Word of God. Born for good and bad, young and the old, those lost in wonder and those losing wonder, every occupation, the addicted and tempted, the hurting, self-assured and the self-doubting, every-week-attenders and once-a-year-stoppers-by, to faithful and unfaithful. This is the marvel that never dulls and the joy that never ends: He is born for all, and He is born for you. Merry Christmas.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; Amen.