

Christmas Day 2016

Besides Christmas as a name, this day is also called "the Nativity of our Lord," which at least clarifies that the reason we're celebrating Christ is for his birthday!

Yet that still requires clarification. Mostly birthdays are about a ticking clock and a mark of getting older, as I myself notched ahead to 38 years on Thursday. Rarely from birth could we claim someone is destined for greatness or be able to predict the shape of their life much at all; observing Martin Luther King Jr's birthday, for example, is retrospective, for what he went on to accomplish and not because on the day of his birth even his family could've expected the Civil Rights movement or that this newborn son would lead a nonviolent revolution against racism, militarism, and extreme materialism.

Yet with Jesus, our stories proclaim huge expectations from this moment of nativity or even before: that he is a Savior bringing great joy to all people (Luke 2:10-11), a light to the nations (2:32), that he will be called great and will reign forever (1:32-33), that he will save his people from sins (Matthew 1:21), and fulfill what prophets had proclaimed of old (1:22). That's predicting an awful lot for a baby.

But I guess the rest of us don't have angelic messengers or a heavenly chorus heralding our arrival in the world. We get a doctor's a-ok and friends and family to cradle us and say, "Isn't he cute? She looks just like her father."

That ordinariness points to another term characterizing and best embodying this day: incarnation. It comes from the Gospel of John's proclamation: "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Incarnation is a word for en-fleshing, for God's presence amid the meatiness and carnality and very real, bodily parts of our existence in this world. So today is a feasty celebration, a day for, indeed, meat, plus cookies and wine and tables spread, for treats from stockings, and extra goodies.

Besides feasting, incarnation means this is a day for extravagant presents wrapped with pretty paper and for enjoying companionship and great music. It's a day for a walk to wonder at snow and birdsong. Or—given the rainyness—to curl up with a warm blanket and a book. There are so many possible delights, and Christmas—this incarnational, earthy day—is about all of them, since nothing is profane or secular or separated from God. All we experience is holy and blessed and touched by God.

On the other side—which we must not forget—this incarnation wasn't only in the enjoyments of life. This birthday, this baby born into our flesh, came into life with a worn out and exhausted mother, surrounded by sheep poop (as a recent Saturday Night Live sketch portrayed with theological accuracy), with lowlife shepherds, and oppressive systems and political disappointments and the homelessness of "no room in the inn."

Lest we missed that point on his birthday, Jesus grew up not for the royal palaces and posh easy life, but to hang out with the hungry and hurting, the sinners and prostitutes, telling people they were forgiven, that their faith made illness well, that God had come near to them.

So as we hold the celebration today, the feast, the special birthday party with the richest treats and brightest lights and company, we also hold the sorrows and sadnesses of life, the suffering and longing, like our reflections did—of prison and isolation, of divisions and wars and insecurities and disasters both natural and unnatural. These are where Christ most wants to be identified, and for whom God's arrival in the world is most transformatively hopeful. Nothing and no one is left out.

It is with this broadest sense of life, the good and the bad, the celebrated feast and the needful holding fast that we have the full image of observing Christmas, of incarnation, of God with us.

Christmas *from Prison* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Christmas Sourcebook, p10)

Viewed from a Christian perspective, Christmas from a prison cell can, of course, hardly be viewed as particularly problematic. Most likely many of those here in

prison will celebrate a more meaningful and authentic Christmas than in places where all that survives of the celebration is the feast in name only. That misery, sorrow, poverty, loneliness, helplessness, and guilt mean something quite different in the eyes of God than according to human judgment; that God turns toward the very places from which humans turn away; that Christ was born in a stable because there was no room for him in the inn—a prisoner grasps this better than others. For the prisoner the Christmas story is glad tidings in a very real sense. And to the extent that he [or she] believes it, a prisoner has been placed in Christian community and is a part in the communion of saints, a fellowship transcending the bounds of time and space and reducing the months of confinement here in prison walls to insignificance.

On Christmas I shall be thinking of you all very much, and I want you to believe that I too shall have a few hours of real joy and that I am not allowing my troubles to get the better of me....When one thinks of the horrors that have overcome so many recently, then one becomes aware anew of how much we still have to be grateful for. Presumably ... the children will think back on [this Christmas] for many years to come. But perhaps precisely this will reveal to some for the first time, the true meaning of Christmas. May God protect us all.

with great gratitude and love,
your Dietrich

Amazing Peace: A Christmas Poem, Maya Angelou
Thunder rumbles in the mountain passes
And lightning rattles the eaves of our houses.
Flood waters await us in our avenues.
Snow falls upon snow, falls upon snow to avalanche
Over unprotected villages.
The sky slips low and grey and threatening.
We question ourselves. What have we done to so affront nature?
We worry God. Are you there? Are you there really?
Does the covenant you made with us still hold?
Into this climate of fear and apprehension, Christmas enters,
Streaming lights of joy, ringing bells of hope
And singing carols of forgiveness high up in the bright air.
The world is encouraged to come away from rancor,
Come the way of friendship. It is the Glad Season.
Thunder ebbs to silence and lightning sleeps quietly in the corner.
Flood waters recede into memory.
Snow becomes a yielding cushion to aid us
As we make our way to higher ground.

It is no use saying that we are born two thousand years too late to give room to Christ. ... Christ is always with us, ...

But now it is with the voice of our contemporaries that he speaks, with the eyes of store clerks, factory workers, and children that he gazes; with the hands of office workers, slum dwellers, and suburban housewives that he gives.

It is with the feet of soldiers and tramps that he walks, and with the heart of anyone in need that he longs for shelter.

And giving shelter or food to anyone who asks for it, or needs it, is giving it to Christ. We can do now what those who knew him in the days of his flesh did.

I am sure that the shepherds did not adore and then go away to leave Mary and her Child in the stable, but somehow found them room ...

If we hadn't got Christ's own words for it, it would seem raving lunacy to believe that if I offer a bed and food and hospitality to some man or woman or child, and that my guest is Christ. There is nothing to show it, perhaps. There are no halos already glowing round their heads – at least none that human eyes can see. ...

It would be foolish to pretend that it is always easy to remember this. If everyone were holy and handsome, with ... neon lighting [shining] from them, it would be easy to see Christ in everyone.

If Mary had appeared in Bethlehem clothed, as [the book of Revelation] says, with the sun [and] a crown ... then people would have fought to make room for her.

But that was not God's way for her, nor is it Christ's way for himself, now when he is disguised under every type of humanity that treads the earth. ...

In Christ's human life, there were always a few who made up for the neglect of the crowd. The shepherds did it; their hurrying to the crib atoned for the people who would flee from Christ. The wise men did it; their journey across the world made up for those who refused to stir one hand's breadth from the routine of their lives. ...

[Yet] It is not a duty to help Christ, it is a privilege. ... And that is the way [hospitality] should still be given. Not for the sake of humanity. Not because it might be Christ who stays with us, comes to see us, takes up our time. Not because these people remind us of Christ, ... but because they are Christ, asking us to find room for him, exactly as he did at the first Christmas.