

The Nativity of our Lord
Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7; Titus 2:11-14; Psalm 96; Luke 2:1-20
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It is nearly impossible to miss Christmas. Just after Thanksgiving colored lights begin appearing on houses and front yards, and Easy music 98.1 FM plays continuous Christmas music. Newspapers are filled with Christmas sale flyers. Regardless of one's religious orientation, it's impossible to miss the sights and sounds of Christmas.

But the first Christmas was a different story. In fact the whole world missed it except for a young couple, a few barnyard animals and some shepherds. According to Luke's version of Jesus' birth, Mary and Joseph were so ordinary they couldn't qualify for inside accommodations in spite of her advanced stage of pregnancy. Jesus' birth was less than typical even for the poorest of families.

We might think that Jesus' birth would've, should've attracted more attention. More angels appearing in villages and certainly in Jerusalem – the capital. More choruses of "Glory to God in the highest" and "To you is born this day a Savior." More lights in the sky – fireworks, starbursts, meteor showers or aurora borealis. But no! It was nearly invisible with little fuss. The son of God arrived under the cover of dark – a stealth appearance.

Ever wonder what happened to those shepherds? They had the surprise of a lifetime on yet another long, boring night spent outside. They were indeed terrified, for it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. They weren't prepared for a heavenly host who overwhelmed all their senses with the glory of the Lord. They had no place to hide so they were a captive audience to hear of the messiah's birth in a place not fit for even the likes of them. This they had to see to believe, and they make haste toward town. It's been said of them that they worship with their feet. They don't procrastinate or rationalize why they should stay put to tend their sheep. If God can be born in a human baby, then certainly God can watch over their flocks for a few hours.

How were their lives changed forever after that incredible night? Did they ever visit Jesus in Nazareth to observe his upbringing and evaluate his authenticity? Was he showing signs of divinity? The gospel writer doesn't give us a clue. The more serious question for us to contemplate is, "How has Jesus' birth changed us?" We've celebrated and observed many Christmases with colored lights, decorated houses inside and out, special music, additional social engagements, shopping, communications, baking, gift exchanging, and church services. What appreciable difference has it made in our lives? Has all the extra Christmas activity going on outside us made significant changes inside us? Are we more patient, kind, generous and peaceable? Do we make attending worship a greater priority? You obviously have. Do we worship with our feet and hands and wallets by giving more to the less fortunate?

It's hard to miss this holy season for all the externals that accompany it. God knows we need occasions to be festive because our lives can be humdrum, even dreary and at times downright desperate. Christmas with all the trimmings does lift our spirits and elevate our joy. Even so, we all know someone for whom this time of year is the hardest of all because one most dear to them is absent.

We all need the deeper meaning of Christmas – the one that can still go largely unnoticed. The one all the glitz ultimately points to: the extraordinary revealed in the ordinary birth of a child. We often hear it said, “Put the Christ back in Christmas.” We all know what that means. The deeper meaning of Christmas is that we can't take Christ out of Christmas. Christmas means God is imbedded in every aspect and detail of life. God is in this world, our world, to stay. Nothing is purely secular anymore because God is within the fabric of all things.

The incarnation – God's arrival in human flesh – was God's decision to no longer try to influence the creation from without by commandments etched in stone or through prophetic mouthpieces. From now on God would persuade from the inside. Jesus' birth begins an intravenous treatment if you will. The nature of God to heal, forgive, unite, restore, kingdom-build will be unstoppable and ongoing whether we see it always or not. Christmas then is the assurance that God's plan will not be frustrated; that new life will always come from death; that grief and pain can be turned to joy; heaven will swallow up hell; the darkness will be flooded with light; goodness will reign eternal.

“For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” The best gifts of Christmas for adults are not the ones we'll unwrap but the little, almost unnoticed, unexceptional occurrences that remind us of God's constant presence.

A sweet young girl going table to table at the men's shelter asking each man if he needs more water or soda to drink. A stranger approaching me in front of the church, going out of his way to shake my hand and wish the pastor a Merry, Merry Christmas. Teenagers, not confident about their choral abilities, singing carols at the Ladies' Home then afterwards lightheartedly competing to eat the most pizza slices. Dear parishioners cheerfully decorating and preparing the church for this celebration of praise and thanksgiving.

These small acts of kindness, occurring in varieties of ways, millions of times every day, are the lifeblood and heartbeat of God flowing unencumbered within our world. These will continue when the decorations are stored back up in the attic, the company leaves, cards are recycled and naked trees are put out with the trash.

A young novice experiencing his first Christmas as a monastic wrote to his parents, “You perhaps cannot comprehend how we celebrate Christmas here; on the first Christmas day we stay in our rooms all day, except for worship in the church, occupied with nothing but contemplating what had happened in the stable near Bethlehem. No Christmas carols, no crib, no Christmas tree (not even a little branch of it), no presents,

no candles – nothing, quite nothing save what happened at Bethlehem. And yet I can assure you quite honestly that I never experienced such a merry Christmas....here the joy is more deep.” We should be grateful that we can celebrate Christmas with all the fixings, but we know the fixings don’t make Christmas.

A couple from Franklin, Virginia, were interviewed on Public Radio Wednesday. They would both be losing their jobs within weeks. Yet they were caroling for shut-ins along with other members of their church. When asked about their prospects, the wife said, “We know that God will see us through these difficult times.”

God came into the world at Christmas as a human child to show us once and for all the Almighty’s everlasting commitment to us and our welfare. May all our joy, faith and trust be more deep as we contemplate this glorious birth. Amen.