



CHRISTMAS EVE 2009 **THE TRUE JOY OF CHRISTMAS**

24 December 2009
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Isaiah 9:6

This is the evening awaited by more people across the face of the earth than any other. This is the holiest night of the year. This is Christmas Eve, when God Himself took on human flesh and became one of us. And while it is not the most ancient of stories, I am quite sure that the vast majority of humanity is quite familiar with the “big picture” of Christmas Eve.

We are familiar with all the key characters: Mary and Joseph, the Shepherds and the Angels. From little on we know who they are and what part they played in the Divine Drama of the birth of our Savior. Most of us have acted out the parts in Christmas stories in our earlier years and we all know the dialog by heart.

We also know the places: the little towns of Bethlehem and Nazareth, and the great city of Jerusalem and we could probably sketch out rudimentary maps of the Holy Land and mark the routes taken by the holy family, even down to Egypt.

We understand the divine choreography that God put into place to bring all His Old Testament prophecies to fruition: the “*Pax Romana*” (the peace of Rome) that allowed Caesar Augustus from faraway Rome to rule over Israel and order a census to be taken, thus moving Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem. And whether the “star” was a conjunction of planets, a comet or a miracle, we know God set it into the sky in order to bring the Magi from afar to honor the Christ-child as the King that He truly was, while at the same time fulfilling yet another prophecy from the Old Testament.

In the “prop department” we’re also well versed, ready to complete our mental picture of the first Christmas with a manger, an assortment of animals, a chorus of singing angels, camels and containers of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

We’re certainly aware of the villain in the story, the insanely jealous and paranoid Herod who would order the deaths of children to save himself, even as he was dying from a hideous disease.

As Christians, all that we’ve just described have, or for the young among us, will become a part of what I will call our “Christian tribal memory.” It’s the collective body of knowledge around and about how God set into motion the most divine and wonderful of all dramas.....the story of our salvation. It’s a

story that is so simple and clear that little children can TREASURE it along with the rest of us and yet it is a story the depths of which we struggle to grasp not 'cognitively' in our minds, but spiritually and emotionally.

In Luther's catechetical parlance, the question we seek to answer on this most holy of nights is what does Christmas MEAN for us and to us. WHY did God DO Christmas? What does it really mean?

Those aren't easy questions to answer, at least if we want to "go deeply." We can spend lifetimes looking, asking, searching and contemplating answers to the "WHY" of Christmas.

Some of us will look for our answers in the prophets, finding great joy in the words of tonight's Old Testament lesson from Isaiah 9, where God promises to bring to each of us "*a child*," who will be for us "*a Wonderful Counselor, a Mighty God, an Everlasting Father, and a Prince of Peace*." I find those four titles of our newly-born Messiah to be some of the most revealing in all Scripture. After all, I need all of what they entail: someone to Counsel me, be Mighty when I am not, bring an everlasting character to this most finite of bodies, and provide peace when all that the world seems to bring is war.

But if you'll pardon my pastoral prerogatives, on this most still and silent, holy and peaceful of all nights, I would like to share with you where I find my greatest blessing in the drama that unfolds each Christmas eve, this one included.

For me the answer to my quest for the true meaning of Christmas is found in the story of the Prodigal Son. Like the Christmas story, it's one that is quite well known in our Christian culture. It's simple, yet deep, with mysteries and meanings that touch every one of us. You probably remember the story, but I'll review anyway. There are three characters: a wise and wealthy father and his two sons. It takes place on the family estate: a large home and farm complex complete with servants and livestock.

The younger son, in an act of complete rebellion, rejects his father, his family, his upbringing....literally his entire life, and demands his inheritance so he can leave home. Away he goes into a downward spiral of irresponsible living until the only thing he has left is a memory of his father's love.....the father who ultimately welcomes him home with open arms.

And then there is the older son, the "stay home and be good" son, the son who makes it perfectly clear that he tolerates no fools and no foolishness....his brother and his father included. His judgment on lesser beings is as cold as his heart and his failure to understand the radical nature of his father's "prodigality" is obvious to all but himself.

I have been both sons: the younger *and* the older. I've been through times when I have wandered far from the "Everlasting Father" and His love and rejected the "the wonderful counselor." I've also considered myself far holier than most, and pronounced judgment on others who certainly don't measure up to my standards, while at the same time almost believing that I am the great and wise one!

The story of the Prodigal Son helps me to understand the answer the meaning of Christmas, which comes in the form of this question: to whom do I belong? Do I belong to the world? Am I looking for *love* in all the wrong places...as are so many, when I take the gifts God has given me and head off to some distant land seeking to impress people or compete for earthly rewards instead of developing them for the glory of God?

The YOUNGER SON reminds me that Jesus had to leave HIS home and travel to a faraway and distant country too, but for a very different and unselfish reason: to live an absolutely sinless life, thereby fulfilling God's Law. His motivation was far less complex than those things that so often drive me. His motivation was pure love. God.... In love with His people! God.... In love with me!

The OLDER SON reminds me that there are times that I can be lost and joyless, even while I am still "*living*" in my Father's house. Despite that, the Father's love for me never diminishes one iota. The older son reminds me that the Father has given me far more love than I can ever comprehend, and certainly don't deserve.

It's clear from the story of the Prodigal that God doesn't love the younger son more than the elder. He treasures them both. He's patient with both. His inheritance is there for both. His love for both never wanes or fades.

It's clear in the Christmas story that in life God plays no favorites either. Jesus came for everyone: the rich and the poor, the far and the near, the Jew and the Gentile, for those who consider themselves to be worthless and for those who think they are better than the bunch. It is in the Christmas story that God comes into our *world* for the single purpose of redeeming us so that we can live in HIS *home* with Him forever.

Finally, I will make one more observation on this Christmas Eve, one that revolves around "*comfort and joy*," as the song says. The Prodigal Son reminds me that while joy abounded in the life of those who received the love of the Father, it was truly the Father who truly and fully understood....and celebrated....redemption!

That's why the heavenly host sang so joyfully as they watched God's eternal plan of salvation unfold before them in the little town of Bethlehem 2000 years ago and why they continue to sing for joy. God has come to be with us, so that we can be with God.

MERRY CHRISTMAS!