

Christmas Day, 2011
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A Christmas That Lives Up to Its Hype

We put a lot of pressure on Christmas to live up to the hype and the mountain of expectations. We hope the Christmas spirit will pervade and prevail sending good wishes to all it touches and that there might be real peace on earth. That our political leaders might put aside narrow partisan agendas and work for the common good. That preachers might deliver a gem of a sermon to inspire the faithful into a new year. That far-away family members might be able to reach home for the holidays. That soldiers returning from war might arrive before the glow of the season fades and, more importantly, pick up the pieces of their lives. In the cold north, of course, we also want snow. Some of us at least would love to see snow – at least a dusting – so that we might have a white Christmas, the one of Irving Berlin’s imagining and Bing Crosby’s crooning: “I’m dreaming of a white Christmas, just like the ones I used to know. Where the treetops glisten and children listen to hear sleigh bells in the snow.”

Holy Scripture is not unfamiliar with hype and sky-high expectations. The prophet Isaiah certainly ups the ante for a people longing for rebuild their lives after a long exile. ⁷*How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’* ⁹*Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.* ¹⁰*The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.* (Chapter 52) This is a joyous, expansive, responsive and universal claim and promise that God is doing great things.

And talk about hype! The great prologue to John’s gospel read every Christmas morning: *In the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God, and Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him. The true light was coming into the world.* John’s gospel has no mention of the baby Jesus born in Bethlehem, but places God’s son at the beginning and center of all that is unfolding.

Yet down to earth is what the incarnation of Christ and the birth of Jesus is all about. The God of all creation, the God known through Abraham and Moses and David and the prophets came and camped out, pitched a tent, and chose to stake God’s divine claim with us. In Jesus, God shares are human history in flesh and blood, sweat and tears, sadness and joy. That is why we are here this morning.

Last night we were grounded once again with the greatest of stories from Luke’s gospel with Joseph and Mary with child making their way to Bethlehem. Writer Huston Smith (*The Soul of Christianity*, pg. 38) reminds us that Christianity is a historical religion, founded on historical happenings. He said that, “The life of a Jewish carpenter who was born in a stable, was executed a criminal at age thirty-three, never traveled more than ninety miles from his birthplace, owned nothing, attended no school, marshaled no army, and instead of producing books, did his only writing in the sand. Nevertheless, his birthday is kept across the world.”

The story of Jesus continues to draw us in. Granted, there was no film crew on hand to catch every statement he made and record each miracle. But the life that began in a manger is, two thousand years later, the most amazing life ever lived. It was amazing for the people he chose to be with, the things he found most important, the human characteristics he would consistently condemn (he was no fan of hypocrisy), the things he repeated the most (“do not fear” and “love one another”) and the way the he always pointed to his heavenly Father and never asked others to bow down before him and worship him. If John the Baptist pointed to Jesus, Jesus always pointed heavenward. He came to love and serve the world. And we are his followers. We are not perfect followers or consistent followers or even always-confident followers. Yet we walk on.

So does this annual birthday of Jesus live up to all the hype and expectations? Many children fortunate enough to be born into an affluent society and home would probably say yes, for a day at least. It is no accident that many people go to great lengths to promote toy drives to get presents to children who might not have anything to open in this day. The cynic might say that all this activity is just a misguided extension of our society’s runaway materialism: I believe there is something more subtle and deeper going on.

Children, and the child still inside and alive in all of us, get it. For a day, the Christmas of our childhoods—the anticipation of the morning, cookies and milk near the tree, gifts to open and dreaming of the sound of sleigh bells at night—form the foundation for children to discover, and adults to relearn, the gift of wonder.

Ronald Rolheiser, the Roman Catholic spiritual writer invites us to see this day through new eyes, making a “deliberate and conscious effort at assuming the posture of a child before reality. We must work at regaining the primal spirit, a sense of wonder, the sense that reality is rich and full of mystery.” (pg. 91, *Forgotten Among the Lilies*).

This is what I think this day is about: If we believe in miracles, they can happen. If we dream of a different kind of life and different world, God will dream with us. If we decide that, against all odds, in the face of head-winds and obstacles, going counter to the doubters and haters of the world, that hope will win out then God responds with an invitation to walk with us.

The Christmases of our dreams may not materialize in ways that the world can measure. 2011 has been a tough year for many in our city and our nation. People continue to look for work or a safe place to live. Yet we are continually drawn to the light of Christ to get us through the dark nights of our souls. And we discover that the gift we most need to open this morning is the gift where there is absolutely no shame in re-gifting and passing it on to someone else. Open your eyes and see. Open your ears to hear the Good News from God that there is a plan for our welfare, comfort, and salvation.