

Emmanuel, Born in the Shadows

Readings

Is 9:1-7

Ps 96

Titus 2:11-14

Lk 2:1-14

Opening

A week ago I began reading aloud Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* to my daughter, Madeleine. I grew up on the George C. Scott version of *A Christmas Carol* on TV and the live version at UT's Clarence Brown Theater. But notwithstanding my substandard accents for Scrooge & Marley, reading this novella aloud is my favorite version of this classic story.

When the clock strikes one in the second stave, the Spirit of Christmas Past appears and transports Scrooge to the village of his childhood. "Good Heaven! I was bred in this place. I was boy here," Scrooge exclaimed. In that place, Scrooge was "conscious of a thousand odours floating in the air, each one connected with a thousand thoughts, and hopes, and joys, and cares long, long, forgotten!"¹

Perhaps re-reading the story aloud this time explains why I'm unusually comforted by memories of Christmases past. Or maybe it's because I'm reading this story in Christmas 2020, the first Christmas any of us have spent in a pandemic.

¹Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*,

Nostalgia is always near at Christmastime, even in the best of years. We tell stories in kitchens, at table, by the hearth. We remember the goodness of years past. But there's always a pain within nostalgia. The word 'nostalgia' literally means "the ache to return home." Has there been a year where there has been a more widespread ache across our world to retrieve the world we have lost?

I find myself taking this ache for home and returning to Christmases past, but in a different way. I'm seeking something different than the consolation of pleasant memories. I'm searching for Christ this Christmas Eve night, not in the best of times past, but in the hardest of times past. As we journey in our hearts to Bethlehem during a pandemic, I wonder:

- What was the quality of Christmas joy during the Spanish Flu epidemic from 1918-1920?
- What was Christmas like 3 weeks after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941? How did the Christmas story read when our soldiers were shipping off to war with an unknown duration?
- And now I'm trying to recall Christmas in 2001 after 9/11. What did Isaiah's prophecies and Luke's Nativity story sound like while we were still reeling from devastating terror and tragedy?

Emmanuel in the Fullness of Time

I'm seeking the Incarnate Christ this Christmas Eve, not my favorite Christmas memories of years past. In the grip of a pandemic; after a year of social and political strife, where does one find the Messiah of Israel?

And then we hear Luke's familiar words, the beginning of the narrative of Jesus' birth. In his opening lines, the mere mention of a few figures invoked the deep gloom covering a whole nation:

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria.²

There was a popular saying in those days among ordinary Jews: “no king but God.”³ Yet Caesars ruled over Israel, not the royal line of King David’s sons. Caesars and their governors ruled Israel with a reign of terror, crucifying slaves and robbers along Israel’s most highly trafficked roads. As for Jewish rulers, Herod was an illegitimate, murderous king, a puppet ruler of Rome’s power. Don’t look to Jerusalem to throw the vengeful, pagan Romans out. Israel waited for Messiah with terrible longing; hers was an existence of deep darkness and desperate hope.

And this was the moment God the Father sent his Son to be born of a virgin. was born Jesus of a virgin in “the fullness of time,” according to Scripture. ⁴God, who created the heavens and the earth in six days; God, who ordered and governs time with his own hand; God chose the time of deep darkness and gloom to be born. And through his prophet Isaiah, the Lord declared that the Child born in deep darkness will be called Emmanuel—God with us. God with us in our deepest darkness. God with us, never to leave us or forsake us, in the midst of our discouragement and despair.

When I look for the presence of Christ in Christmases past, I find that it is that first Christmas that makes the most sense in the most difficult of years. Christ was not born in conditions conducive to his acceptance and wide acclaim; Christ was born in and among the poor in spirit whose hope had nearly expired. If you are searching for Christ at Christmas, you will not find him in places of safety, wealth, and warmth. You must look for Emmanuel among those who walk through the valley of the shadow death. For Emmanuel is the Good Shepherd who comes to walk alongside his sheep suffering in this weary world. Emmanuel comes as the Light of the World, born to penetrate the darkness, so that “there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish.”

²Lk 2:1–2.

³N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God, Christian Origins and the Question of God* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1992), 302.

⁴Galatians 4.4

A Light Shines in the Darkness, Redemption Dawns

In the tradition of Christian iconography, the manger of Jesus is positioned above a dark abyss. Tradition tells us the Christ child was born in a cave, a naturally dark place. But there is more mystery, more truth in the image. The theologian Paul Evdokimov says of the Nativity: “Christ is born in the shadow of death and ***the Nativity bends down the heavens even to Hades.***”⁵

Yes, the Nativity bends down the heavens to Hades so that the Child born in the manger will swallow up death in his victory. Bethlehem and Golgotha are inextricably linked, not only spiritually, but geographically. The place of Jesus’ birth and the place of his death are only six miles apart.

This has been proximity of Jesus’ birth and death has been described most beautifully by John Donne, who said:

The whole life of Christ was a continual Passion; others die Martyrs but **Christ was born a Martyr**. He found a Golgotha (where he was crucified), even in Bethlehem where he was born; to his tenderness then, the straws were almost as sharp as the thornes after; and the Manger as uneasy at first, as his Cross at last. **His birth and his death were but the continual act**, and his Christmas day and his Good Friday are but the evening and morning of one and the same day⁶

Such is the cost of sending God’s only Son to be Emmanuel. And why did the Son submit to the Father’s will, to be born of the Virgin Mary, to suffer on the cross? So that he might redeem *all our suffering* with his victory. And victory over suffering yields one great experience: joy. That is why the angels sang: with the birth of Jesus in fullness of time, which

⁵Paul Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty*, 279.

⁶John Donne, Sermon from Christmas Day, 1626

was the fullness of earth's darkness, redemption had dawned. Joy had dawned. The shadows recede with Emmanuel.

The 4th century church father, Gregory Nazianzus, called the Nativity of Jesus "the feast of re-creation." Well, let it be so. Look for Emmanuel in the shadows, in the isolation, in the loneliness. He was born among the poor in spirit so that he would raise the sorrows of earth to the joys of heaven. Bethlehem has opened Eden.

So let us look not to Christmases of the near past for consolation. Only look upon the Christmas past which was the first Christmas night. And on this Christmas in this most difficult year, let us sing in the dark with the angels the dawn of redemption: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased." Amen.