

## WAITING FOR THE LIGHT *An Invasion of Love*

John 1:1-14

December 21, 2025

My mother's birthday is December 23rd. I remember, as a child, watching my father, a busy pastor in the most hectic time of the year, pause the chaos of Christmas preparation to celebrate her. Every year. No exceptions. The sermon could wait. Mom deserved her day. All of you with late December birthdays know this tension quite well.

I thought about that as I returned to the opening verses of the Gospel of John. It is striking that John doesn't seem interested in Jesus' birthday at all. There are no angels. No shepherds. No star. No little town of Bethlehem. No little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay. No wisemen bring elaborate gifts to the Christ child. John skips the pageantry, and I think I know why.

For John, Christmas is not Jesus' birthday. It's ours. *To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God. Only in John do we get our own verse. We are celebrated. Remade. Claimed as children of God. Only then the Word became flesh and lived among us.*

That is Christmas. God close enough to touch. God near enough to make us new.

But John is not looking back at Bethlehem. He's looking at you—announcing your birth. Declaring that we are not without hope. That the powers of this world are not permanent. That another way, a truer way, is possible.

At my childhood church, Christmas didn't truly arrive until Gladys Yarborough stood in the choir loft to sing *O Holy Night*. When she began, my father, seated behind the pulpit, would close his eyes and smile. I remember how her voice carried the weight of words that made each soul feel its worth. *A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices; for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.*

When Ms. Gladys died in 2011, her Christmas Eve solo was the highlight of her obituary. I teared up when I read it. Some moments will never really leave us.

The poem that became that Christmas carol was written in 1843, the same year that Charles Dickens published his *A Christmas Carol* and the same weary world. Dickens wrote in a London ravaged by poverty, harsh child labor, and the brutal inequities of industrialism.

He wrote out of moral outrage and Christian hope. He believed that stories had the power to wake people up. He believed that Christmas, the greatest story of all, demanded a response. *A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices.*

And our world is weary. Exhausted. Drained. Community in all its forms unraveling. Hatred now open and unapologetic. Violence senseless and unending. Grief upon grief upon grief. And John is perfectly clear that God comes in the middle of it all.

This is not a safe story. *He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.* God showed up anyway. In the flesh. In the danger. In the mess. Unwelcome by even those who most hoped he would come. He was in the world—the world that came into being through him. Yet that very world, his world, did not know him. Did not recognize him. Did not acknowledge him. Did not listen to him. Did not follow him.

**Incarnation is an invasion.** Now, we've heard "invasion" aimed at those seeking safety, those seeking home. But in scripture, the invader is God. God crossed every border. God comes uninvited. Unwanted. Utterly vulnerable. The Holy One shows up not as Caesar, but as the threatened. Not as Herod, but as the hunted.

Within days of his birth, Mary and Joseph will wrap their newborn baby in the night and run for Egypt, crossing borders to save his life, becoming refugees in a foreign land where they speak a different language, where they are religious and ethnic minorities, where they are unwelcome strangers.

The King of Kings entered the world as one of the least of these. You see, the holy family was the invasion Herod most feared.

In our city, people who gathered to celebrate a new beginning, who had done everything our system demanded, who had waited years, passed every test, paid every fee—came to take an oath and were turned away at the door. A ritual of rejection rooted in fear. Friends, we who celebrate God's coming in human form must never forget: the birth happened under the threat of slaughter. This is not a safe story.

As my professor Shirley Guthrie wrote, "It happened at a particular time, in a particular place, in connection with a particular mother. It happened 'in the days of Herod' ... 'In the town of Bethlehem' ... 'of his mother, Mary.'"

Herod. The anxious king who ruled by fear. Herod. The one who would hunt down innocent children to eliminate a perceived threat. Fear was Herod's currency. And it worked.

Until God invaded his world. Right there. In the teeth of empire. Under the shadow of the very violence that would later take his life. The Word became flesh and lived among us. This is what incarnation means: The God of the universe needed the protection of human parents. God as bone and blood and breath. Subject to Herod's violence and Caesar's census and the brutality of empire. God, rejected. God, acquainted with sorrow. God chose flesh.

If God could not love this world from a distance, neither can we. Over Thanksgiving, we took our boys to see *A Christmas Carol* at the Indianapolis Repertory Theatre. Our boys had never seen it. When Marley's ghost appears with those heavy chains dragging, face twisted with regret, voice echoing throughout the

room, I felt my eight-year-old's hand grip my arm. He clamped on and would not let go. He didn't look away. He barely breathed.

Dickens wanted to awaken the human spirit. He asked hard questions of a culture. When Scrooge is told the destitute would prefer death to the horrific workhouses, he replies, "If they would rather die, they had better do it and decrease the surplus population." The efficiency of evil.

But you know the moment when Ben grabbed my arm. Scrooge tries to comfort his old partner. "But, Jacob, you were always a good man of business."

And Marley, from beyond the grave, cries out, rattling those chains. "Mankind was my business! The common welfare was my business! Charity, mercy, forbearance, benevolence—these were all my business!"

And with that, Dickens holds a mirror before a nation drifting toward cruelty by convenience. A world where it was easier to manage ledgers than see suffering. Where it was possible to walk past need every single day and never stop. A world not so different from our own.

Jacob Marley missed the incarnation. He lived an entirely disembodied life; he was untouched, untroubled, uninvolved, unbothered while the world ached around him. Now he carries chains forged link by link from every single opportunity he missed. And my eight-year-old got that immediately.

But there is still time. The call is clear. Love—if it is God's love—demands flesh. Your hands. Your time. Your presence in the rooms you've been avoiding. Your voice in the places where silence hurts the vulnerable. Your humanity. Not in theory, but in person.

*The Word became flesh and lived among us. With us. Beside us.*

And this same God stays because the work begun is not yet complete. We still see the destructive force of evil. The cruelty. The greed. The indifference to suffering. We see strangers unwelcomed and the

innocent slaughtered. We see the vulnerable crushed, and the darkness still suffocates.

But listen to this. An occupation has begun that promises to overturn it all. God's occupation of this broken world. God's love invading every corner, crossing every border, refusing to be kept out or kept at bay.

And what of us? We have been deployed. Not as conquerors, but carriers of love. People who know that mankind is our business. Compassion, mercy, the common welfare—all our business.

Somehow John knows that light burns on through the darkest days. Tonight is the longest night of the year. We are in the absolute depth of darkness. As dark as it gets. Which means—listen to this from the poet Jan Richardson—"This is the night when you can trust that any direction you go, you will be walking toward the dawn."

The darkness has crested. From here, every step is toward light. The invasion we are waiting for. Not agents of violence. Not earthly emperors. Not another reason to be afraid.

But light. Light. Light in every direction. Love. Love. Love. Vulnerable, persistent, and disruptive. Love born in empire, born to refugees, born to break every chain and set us free. Love that will not stop until the world that *is* becomes the world that *ought to be*.

It's time. Everything is broken. The world weary to the bone. Cynicism seeps into every soul. And John announces a birth. So close to Christmas. Most will miss it. Many will reject it.

But, it will come as it always has: God's immense power distilled to its very essence. A baby. A cry in the night. Flesh and bone and breath.

The invasion has already begun.

Do you remember Scrooge waking on Christmas morning? Disoriented, giddy. He says, "I feel like a baby." Born again.

He doesn't know what day it is. You know what day it is. This is your birthday. God showed up in the flesh. It's your turn.