



What are you waiting for? *An Invasion of Love*



John 1:1-14

December 19, 2021

And that is John's Christmas story. You will note, of course, that it contains no angels, no shepherds watching over their flocks by night, no sages following a bright morning star, no little town of Bethlehem, no little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay. John records the miracle of God's advent arrival in the form of a poem. He begins... Well, he begins in the beginning. The very beginning. John turns his Bible all the way back to page one of Genesis and commences with the creation of the world. All of creation reflects the glory of God, and that word of God present from the beginning is the source of light and life. I think of that great hymn text:

*Angels from the realms of glory,
Wing your flight over all the earth;
You who sang creation's story
Now proclaim Messiah's birth.*

John's poem suggests that the same angels who sang at the dawn of creation itself now declare a new beginning. John tells a love story that spans all of time. It is the story of God's persistent love for the world.

And then, at just the right moment, having set the stage as grand as the cosmos, John proclaims the promise in staggering particularity: *The word became flesh and lived among us.* That is Christmas, when that same word present at the creation comes to make a home in human history. God entered and transformed the world in the birth of one human child. In him we were given a permanent picture of the love of God. In him we came to know more about God than has ever been known. This is what each of us, in one way or another, whether we know it or not, is waiting for. We're waiting for a picture

of God, an unmistakable glimpse of the glory and grace of God. It is the truth of our faith; it is the promise of Christmas—that God came close enough to touch. Without that truth, I'm not sure we could persist in the face of all that is wrong, all that is broken, all that is evil and alarming. Without this promise, who could go on? Because of this promise, we can be different. Because of this promise, we can do better. Because of this promise we can care more. Our love can be broader, our faith can be deeper, our compassion can be richer, our forgiveness can be truer, because love entered the world in human form. And that same love can change us.

John reminds us that Christmas comes in a moment. At my childhood church in Greensboro, North Carolina, Christmas did not arrive until Gladys Yarborough stood in the choir loft and cleared her throat to sing. At least, that is how my father felt. Each fall, Dad would wait eagerly to hear whether Gladys had agreed to sing again on Christmas Eve. And of course, every year the answer was always yes. And so, Christmas came year after year as Mrs. Yarborough began: "O Holy Night, the stars are brightly shining..." And Christmas began as my father, sitting on the chancel behind her, closed his eyes and smiled.

That beloved Christmas carol is filled with beautiful imagery reflecting on Christ's birth and on the redemption that it brings to all of creation. This year, my mind is drawn to one line that describes so well the state of my soul and the possibilities of this week. *A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices.*

Are you weary? Is our world not weary? Exhausted.

Fed up. Drained. Undone by the unraveling of community, the blatant bigotry and outright hatred, the senselessness and cruelty of violence, the deep sadness and grief of inexplicable and mounting loss. Our world is weary with it all. So it is good to remember that it was into our world of weariness, our world of persistent darkness, that the word of God in one moment for all time became incarnate, enfleshed, embodied, that God spanned the distance of time and space to be in relationship and to redeem the *real* world with an invasion of divine love.

Every Christmas we remember that a child was born who was to be called Immanuel. His very name means that *God is with us*, that God became flesh and lived among us, that God did not, could not, would not, keep distant. As my teacher Shirley Guthrie wrote, “The birth stories of Jesus remind us that God is with us not in the sense of a beautiful idea or an abstract truth. No, it *happened*. It *happened* at a particular time, in a particular place, in connection with a particular mother: ‘In the days of Herod the king,’ ‘In Bethlehem,’ ‘of Mary.’”ⁱ Not distant, but close enough to touch. Not into the perfection of heavenly glory, but into the weariness of a world that has lost its way, God comes to make a home. Without that truth, who could persist? For seven years now I have held on to a prayer of lament and hope written just after the horrific shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, just eleven days before Christmas.

“Your world seems a bit darker this Christmas. But you were born in the dark, right? You came at night. The shepherds were on nightshift. The Wise Men followed a star. Your first cries were heard in shadows. To see your face, Mary needed a candle flame. The world was dark. Dark with Herod’s jealousy. Dark with Roman oppression. Dark with poverty. Dark with hunger. Dark with violence. Herod went on a rampage, killing babies. Oh, Lord Jesus, you entered the dark world of your day. Won’t you enter ours? Amen.”ⁱⁱ

The deepest truth we know is that God became truly human. That God’s truth became entirely

dependent on human hands and hearts and minds. The fact that Jesus was a human child is essential to the story. But *why*?

Why did God choose incarnation? Why a particular moment? Why a particular place? Why a particular people? Why in the form of a particular infant? Why risk the pain of human life? Why risk the probability of human rejection? Why descend into the brokenness of a world gone wrong? Why, where discord, division, and destruction threaten all that is holy and good? Why come *here*? Why come to the mess we’ve made and keep making worse? Why did God choose incarnation?

On September 16, 2013, Sara and I welcomed our firstborn son, Samuel Joshua, into the world. Now, lots of things happen when a new baby is born. You quickly gain an appreciation for the impact of sleep deprivation. You learn more about babies in a matter of days than you’ve learned throughout the rest of your life. And if you’re lucky, like we were, you are given the most wonderful meals prepared by loving souls and gifted chefs. Members of the congregation kept coming by to offer their help in the form of nourishment, babysitting, shopping lists. And so, when a baby is born, you spend weeks repeating endlessly words like, “You really don’t have to do that.” Five days after Sam was born, my in-laws arrived. They stayed for thirteen days. Immediately on arrival, they got to work. My mother-in-law was extraordinary. Susan prepared meals and cleaned clothes. She washed dishes. She wiped counters. She set the table. She planted flowers in the empty boxes outside our front door. She made daily—sometimes hourly—trips to the grocery store. She filled our freezer and cleaned our floors. All the while, I followed Susan around saying, “You don’t need to do that. You really don’t need to do that.” I said it over and over again.

But I was wrong. She did have to do that. She couldn’t help it. There was nothing I could do or say that would stop her from those tasks. Why? Because love required them. It’s just what love does. Love shows up

when it is needed most and gets to work. Love shows up in the fullness of time and when the moment is right. Love shows up when it is needed most.

The word became flesh. Jesus joined the human story in all its messiness and tragedy. He showed the glory of God in human form. He shined the light of God in the darkness of a broken world. He revealed the power of God in vulnerable love to people too accustomed to coercive domination. This *adventing* God came down because we needed a new vision of hope, a better pathway to peace, a deeper source of joy, a more profound love. We are all well acquainted with the destructive force of evil in our world. But John calls us to remember that we have also seen God's glory, full of grace and truth.

John asks us to testify to that light that no human darkness will ever overcome. To give ourselves over to the invasion of love that says another way is possible. *Another way is possible.* We've seen it. Embodied in an infant. Born in a broken world waiting for redemption. We have seen it. And so, we can find the courage and the strength to clear our voices and sing with Gladys Yarborough and choirs of angels: A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices.

And then, Christmas will be here again. Amen.

ⁱ Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, John Knox Press, 1968. p. 227-228.

ⁱⁱ Max Lucado, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/max-lucados-prayer-in-response-to-conn-school-shooting-86681/>.