

The Real Christmas Story

We often think of Christmas as a time of Christmas greetings and good cheer. The Christmas tree with its twinkling lights stocked with gifts, the timeless carols, the sumptuous Christmas meal and Christmas cake — all of these evoke in us a festive mood filled with feelings of peace, joy and love. And, what a happy ending to a tumultuous year! Indeed, it is fitting that we celebrate — we should be thankful to God for safeguarding and safekeeping us throughout this year!

But what is Christmas really, at its core? What is the Christmas story actually about? What makes Christmas so special?

We live in a broken and sin-laden world. Fundamentally, all sin comes from a broken relationship with God. We are direct witnesses to the consequences of this broken relationship. In fact, we experience it firsthand. A broken relationship with God leads to fraught relationships between people. Our relationships become the immediate casualty because selfishness, self-interest, self-preservation, apathy, envy and hatred set in. The natural world isn't spared the pain either — Creation is suffering the brunt of our unbridled exploitation to feed our incessant hunger for comfort and convenience.

All relationships are interconnected – God, us, and the world – so that when one is affected, all the others are impacted as well.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic is neither caused by God, nor is it a natural occurrence ^{Note 1}. It is a direct result of man's doing, and we are all paying the price for this. There will be more disasters to come – of this you can be sure. There is no “normal” to go back to. Things

will only get from bad to worse so long as that relationship with God is not made right.

It is right in the midst of this gloom and doom that God comes to us! Emmanuel, God is with us! This is the Christmas story. Christmas is about the kingship of God – it is the arrival of the King, and He has come to reclaim and assert His Kingship in a broken world. And, see! Let us see exactly how God does it on that fateful day of the very first Christmas.

1. The Christmas story is one of hardship, distress and loss

The sanitized version of the peaceful nativity scene bears little resemblance to the actual nativity story of the Bible.

- Israel at that time was occupied territory. The people were under an oppressive, cruel tyrant, Herod the Great.
- There was a census for tax purposes which was highly unpopular and had led to a revolt.^{Note 2}
- The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem was a distance of about 150 km. According to Google Maps, it would take more than 30 hours if you tried to walk it. Of course, the journey would have been far more arduous in those days. Don't forget that young Mary was heavily pregnant. It would have been pretty grueling for her.
- With the crush of people back for the census, they all had to put up with relatives. Joseph and Mary must have arrived much later than the other guests, and so there was no more room.^{Note 3}
- All indications we have in the Christmas story show that

Joseph and Mary were poor. For instance, their thanksgiving offering to God for the newborn baby was what was prescribed for the poor of the land. ^{Note 4}

- Jesus had no proper place to lay his head. He did not have a comfy crib. They had to lay him down in a manger. A manger is a feeding trough for animals! We would cringe at this idea of putting our baby in a place where animals feed!
- Shortly after his birth, the whole family had to flee! They became refugees in a foreign land. ^{Note 5}
- In the meantime, a massacre ensues in Bethlehem and its vicinity as Herod unleashes his jealous anger. ^{Note 6} Imagine the horror, pain and anguish!

2. God's revelation of the Christmas event was given to only a select few

When we read the New Testament account of the Christmas event, it may come as a surprise that the Christmas event was not universally proclaimed; not everyone got to witness what God was doing.

God chose a few select individuals. Why? Who are they? Why them and not others?

- **Zacharias** – he was the father of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus. God sent an angel who said to him, “Do not fear...your prayer has been heard.” (Luke 1:13)
- **Mary** – to her, the angel Gabriel said “Do not fear...you have found favor with God.” (Luke 1:30)

- **Joseph** – he was a righteous man and an angel appeared to him in a dream
“Do not fear...” (Matthew 1:20)
- **Shepherds watching their flock by night**
To them, an angel suddenly appeared, and declared,
“Do not fear,... I bring you good news of great joy.” (Luke 2:8-10)

These shepherds were in the same region where Jesus was born. This region might be a reference to Migdal Eder, which translated means ‘tower of the flock’, a reference found in Micah, which also speaks of a day when a Shepherd “will arise and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD his God. (Micah 4:8,5:4)

- **Magi**
This specific term ‘magi’ points to the likelihood that these were astrologers and priests from a Mesopotamian / Persian background. If so, they would have traversed 1000 km or more. We cannot be certain, but Matthew says they were from the East. (Matthew 2:1) They could have had exposure to the Jewish Scriptures passed down during the time of the exile through Daniel and others back in the 6th century BCE, and may have been spiritually receptive to the message and prophecies of the Old Testament. The fact that they had come prepared with expensive gifts to honor a king not of their own says a lot. (Matthew 2:2,11) It is, therefore, highly remarkable that among the first to receive the good news of Christmas were foreigners, priests of another religion. The Magi practically ignored the fact that Herod was the current king of the Jews. Instead, they declared, “Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star in the east

and have come to worship him.” And, why would such knowledgeable people take so much trouble to go to a foreign land to declare their reverence for a newborn king?

This king certainly does not look like a king. Here is the God-appointed King-Deliverer, who is the promised Christ (the Anointed One) and Lord. And where is he to be found?

Note the angelic clue given to the shepherds — they were not to expect someone clad in royal robes. “This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger!” (Luke 2:11,12)

The Magi, too, must have been shocked, as the Star that led them hovered over an ordinary house, not a grand palace. (Matthew 2:9) They must have wondered, is this really the King we have come from so far away to see?

Without those heaven-sent indications these select few would not even have recognized the King.

Only those with eyes to see will see the Kingship of God.

Christ the Lord was born in Bethlehem! But most people were too busy to even notice.

They were oblivious, even blind, to the historic event that was taking place right under their very noses. They failed to see God’s purposes because they were too busy living their lives. The elite were too caught up in living it up and preserving their privileged life, while the others were too tied down with securing a livelihood.

Many would have been dissatisfied and constantly ranting about the situation at hand — the ruthless king, the hardships, the unfairness,

and so on.

Many missed what God was doing in their midst.

This tragic state of affairs makes us think of our own situation.

Do you have eyes to see what God is doing? Do you have the heart to participate in what God is doing?

We will fail to see God's purposes if we are too busy living our lives. Amidst all the uncertainties of today's world, will we miss what God is doing in our midst?

Can we look beyond our present troubles, and see what God is doing? Do we have the eyes to see? Or, are we so preoccupied with the troubles that life brings that we fail to see God in the midst of it all?

Are we the kind of people to whom God can reveal His purposes? Are we the kind of people who will respond to His revelation? Can the King count on us to accomplish His purposes? Are we available for His Majesty's Service?

3. God is in control over the whole Christmas event

God is in control even over kings. He can overrule circumstances in order to advance His gracious purposes. He intervenes miraculously to further His plans to bring salvation to all.

- After Joseph realized his bride-to-be was already pregnant, he planned to annul the betrothal quietly so as not to disgrace her, but God sent an angel in his dream to assure him. (Matthew 1:20- 24)

- God intervened to save the life of baby Jesus. God had allowed the Magi to enquire of Herod as to the whereabouts of baby Jesus, but the Magi inadvertently revealed Jesus as King of the Jews, thereby putting Jesus' life at risk under Herod. In yet another dream, Joseph was warned to flee and remain in Egypt until the next word of instruction. (Matthew 2:13)
- God moved the Magi to make that long journey. They took the trouble to travel all the way from a distant land to give costly gifts (gold, frankincense and myrrh) to Joseph and Mary on account of Jesus. These unexpected gifts would certainly have helped finance their escape and sojourn in Egypt. This makes us think of all the displaced families and refugees in various parts of the world today, suddenly cut off from their means of livelihood because of civil unrest and war.

Contrary to our expectations of God, He does not shield His people from suffering and pain. God could have forestalled Joseph's agony by telling him about His plan for Mary earlier, thus saving him the heartache of having to make this painful decision. God could have indicated to the Magi to avoid going to Herod thereby provoking his jealousy and wrath. God could have removed Herod from power earlier to prevent the needless suffering of families losing their baby boys in little Bethlehem. But He did not. He waited for Herod to die before He sent the angelic message for Joseph and family to return from Egypt.

God is in control, but He intervenes only as a last resort, in order to safeguard His purposes.

God is in control, but He doesn't shield us from pain and

hardship.

God does not seek to diminish or abolish pain and poverty. Why?

It is precisely through adversity that God's Kingdom is advanced!

4. God's Kingdom advances through adversity.

Do we have the confidence that God is in control? Do we have eyes to see that adversity is how God chooses to advance His Kingship?

It is through adversity that God advances His kingship in us, and through us.

If you have eyes to see that God uses adversity to advance His kingdom, then you will understand why so many simply missed the Christmas event.

- **Adversity shatters all illusions of the good life, predictability and security offered by this world.**

If there is anything we have learnt through the COVID-19 experience, it is that life in this world is full of uncertainties. We would be foolish to try to return to life as we knew it before the pandemic.

“Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God.” (1 Timothy 6:17)

If only we could see through this world and to its very character, we would see that we have no need to fear or be anxious because our hope is neither on this world nor its alluring

promises.

- **Adversity forces us to reset and focus on the essentials.**

We must find our “True North”. Really, only one thing is needful. This is a message for the busy. Busyness is our biggest enemy. There is a saying that the good is the enemy of the best. Our busyness means we achieve many good things, except the one best thing: our relationship with God. Our busyness means we are so interconnected with everything and everyone, except with the One who is God over all. The best lies not in how much we can achieve, but in the state and quality of our relationships — primarily and fundamentally, our relationship with God Himself.

- **Adversity shows us up for who we really are.**

Suffering reveals our true character.

We don't need to be freed from adversity; we need to be liberated from ourselves, namely our self-centeredness and selfishness that inevitably lead to sin. The angel declared that the baby was to be called “Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:21)

This is another reason why we need to be freed from our busyness. We have to be in touch with ourselves to know our state before God. Blaise Pascal has a very apt observation for the modern man.

“All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone.”

And we may add, "...without all the gadgets bleeping around us."

- **Adversity gets us out of our comfort zone.**

Adversity forces us to leave our comfort zone, and frees us to fulfill God's purposes and work in and through our lives. Think of the Early Church in Acts 8:4 tells us:

Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the Word.

What happened? Well, the verse before it tells us how it came about.

But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison. Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the Word. (Acts 8:3-4)

Do you see? The church had become so comfortable; they were so happy with the joy of one another's company and life in general. Of course, there's nothing at all wrong with that — joyful fellowship is wonderful! The problem was they had forgotten what their mission was — the Christmas message! The Gospel message! They'd lost sight of their mission to preach the good news! Their mission was to proclaim the Kingship of God in this world — "Our God reigns!" (Isaiah 52:7) God uses this adversity to force them to go forth to proclaim the Word of the King.

We were getting too comfortable, and we got complacent. The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the ways God has got us

moving. It is urgent for the Gospel message to go out. Time is running out. Sin and its allure is spreading much faster than the Word of God. We are losing the battle. The consequences of our failure are incalculable. We are living in the last days. We are in the final throes of the ravages of sin. The world is dying.

“This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come.” (Matthew 24:14)

It is no coincidence that now we can proclaim the Word in this borderless and interconnected world through social media or through apps like Zoom and Google Meet. Through this present adversity, we are suddenly equipped with cyberspace which we must utilize to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom. It is perhaps our last chance to save humanity. Will you participate in this final push to get the message out? This is the good news of Christmas – Our God reigns!

In summary, this is the real Christmas story:

1. Christ was born in the midst of adversity.

The birth of Jesus happened in one of the most turbulent places and times in the history of the world, in terms of geo-political, socio-economic and religious challenges.

2. Yet in this chaos, God sets forth to advance His Kingdom by announcing the coming of His chosen King.
3. God does not diminish or abolish pain and poverty.

It is precisely through adversity that His Kingdom advances.

Adversity is the ground in which the seed of His kingdom grows and flourishes.

4. God advances His Kingdom in the most unexpected ways and through the most unlikely people.
5. God does not ‘airlift’ us out of the trouble in this world, but instead transforms us so that our lives are filled with purpose.
6. We live in a dying world. We are running out of time. Our world is fast deteriorating into a context similar to the time of Jesus’ birth.

“God reigns! His kingdom is at hand!” It’s a clarion call. That is the Christmas story. Can you see what God is doing? Will you respond? Do you have the heart to live out His purposes and advance His kingdom through adversity?

Note 1

The virus [is] derived from a bat-borne virus. It was somehow transmitted to humans. Science, 6 Jul 2022 Vol 377, Issue 6609 pp. 951-959 “As 2019 turned into 2020, a coronavirus spilled over from wild animals into people, sparking what has become one of the best documented pandemics to afflict humans. However, the origins of the pandemic in December 2019 are controversial. Worobey et al. amassed the variety of evidence from the City of Wuhan, China, where the first human infections were reported. These reports confirm that most of the earliest human cases centered around the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market. Within the market, the data

statistically located the earliest human cases to one section where vendors of live wild animals congregated and where virus-positive environmental samples concentrated. In a related report, Pekar et al. found that genomic diversity before February 2020 comprised two distinct viral lineages, A and B, which were the result of at least two separate cross-species transmission events into humans (see the Perspective by Jiang and Wang).”

<https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.abp8715>

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Note 2

Luke 2:1-2, Acts 5:37

Note 3

The word κατάλυμα in Luke 2:7 probably wasn't an inn, but a guest room. See Luke 22:11-12.

Note 4

Luke 2:24 quotes Leviticus 12:8

Note 5

Matthew 2:13

Note 6

Matthew 2:16