

## Christmas Eve 2024 A Litany of Goodness

The birth of Jesus Christ comes to us from three of the four gospels, in quite different ways. We first read it in Matthew, set in the context of a genealogy that spans from Adam to Abraham to the Great Israelite King David, though Mary and Joseph down to Jesus. There is a star in the east and Magi bringing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Perhaps the most popular and well-known presentation of the birth of Jesus comes from the Gospel of Luke, with its attachment to the the birth of John and angelic announcement to the shepherds, of all people, and the heavenly host proclaiming peace on earth to a world that at best knows only a broken and transitory peace. It is the time of Caesar Augustus and Herod the Great. The birth of Jesus is imbedded in history. We know when it happened, we know where.

It is very different in the Gospel of John, in which it stretches back by inference into eternity to the time before even creation itself, with a more theological emphasis, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . .” and then we hear, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us . . . full of grace and truth.” Incarnation. The birth of Jesus rises above history.

Taken together, these three readings provide us with a biblical foundation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus each year. It is more grand than any words that

can be spoken about it. It has even captured the imagination of those who don't believe. It lifts us from the depths of human messiness into the heavenly realms. It is better sung. Much of christendom's highest and best music and art, and expressions of goodwill, and best actions are inspired by it.

Tonight and tomorrow, and throughout this season, is the time to set aside all our questions about it, and if there are any doubts, set them aside as well; it is the time to turn our attention away from the news of the world and from the difficulties of life we experience closer to home, and for the sheer joy of the gift, give praise and thanksgiving and celebrate it as the magnificent wonder that it is, and to let loose at least for a brief time with a concatenation of goodness that names every good thing we know.

I am reminded of the passage in the 4th chapter of Philippians in which Paul encourages us with these words:

“whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” It is time to obey this exhortation, and think about such things.

Grace, mercy, forgiveness, peace, hope, comfort, perseverance, gratitude, friendship, beauty, knowledge, goodness, kindness . . .

Rattle them off in your mind, reject any negative idea, repeat them over in different ways: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control . . . Continue on with honor, integrity, truthfulness. Don't forget sacrifice and duty, justice, compassion, empathy . . .

Get creative, don't get stuck in the rut of my pitiful list. Write poetry, or take a stab at some kind of art, make something. Give gifts, have joy. It is a litany of goodness, a sort of Christmas version of Raindrops on Roses, whatever interests or inspires you; sunsets, birds singing, mountain vistas, children playing, the ocean.

And let there be goodwill towards everyone you know and could even conceive of knowing, for the sake of this birth, and in the name of the Holy Child

Let us sing it forth now with feeling:

## Matthew 1:18-25

18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost.

19 Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily.

20 But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.

21 And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins.

22 Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying,

23 Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.

24 Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife:

25 And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name Jesus.

## John 1:1-14

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.  
2 The same was in the beginning with God.  
3 All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.  
4 In him was life; and the life was the light of men.  
5 And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.  
6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.  
7 The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe.  
8 He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light.  
9 That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.  
10 He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not.  
11 He came unto his own, and his own received him not.  
12 But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name:  
13 Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the human will, but of God.  
14 And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

## Luke 2:1-20

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.  
2 (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)  
3 And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.  
4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)  
5 To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.  
6 And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.  
7 And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.  
8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.  
9 And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.  
10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

12 And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

15 And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.

16 And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

17 And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.

18 And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

19 But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.

20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

Isaiah 9:2, 6

The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.

6 For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

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