

THE HOPE JOURNAL

LEARNING TO LOVE, TOGETHER



DECEMBER 24, 2023

WITH US

when God joins us here

by Drew Downs

One of my favorite things to watch this time of year is a funny video about the subject matter of Anglican Christmas hymns. It gently teases us for talking about the snow on the ground and the woodland creatures that were definitely not present that night in Bethlehem.

And yet, the spirit these images evoke is massive and afford us a way into the sense of the Incarnation's scope. That this isn't just

some meandering thoughts of theologians attempting to quantify the vastness of God.

For each of us to address the Incarnation, we must face it as present, material, physical. That God is, in fact, with us. At the coffee shop or the Chinese restaurant; the ER or the waiting room; the living room or the airport. God is here where we are, sharing this space. With these people. So perhaps we ought to turn our thoughts to what is around us?

CHRISTMAS

2023

WHAT'S GOING ON

*"You know we've got to find a way
To bring some loving here today".*

-Marvin Gaye

Disciples, Apostles, and Saints!

Meaning of Christmas

It is hard to imagine a holiday in North America could get bigger than Christmas. Or that Christmas itself could get any bigger.

And yet, one of the most consistently vexing ideas is that we might miss "the true meaning of Christmas." So many movies and holiday specials crib Dickens, with a Scrooge-like character humbugging through the season. It is clearly *the* most normative of ideas in our culture: that people don't get what the holiday is about.

I'm not sure there's an epidemic of misunderstanding of Christmas so much as the multitudes of meanings we invest in it. Nor does our tradition declare a singular meaning to it.

We celebrate the Incarnation: God made manifest in Jesus. But we also celebrate the multitudes of meanings that come from that!

This is why we can watch *The Grinch* and *A Charlie Brown Christmas* and say that they address the meaning of Christmas. And why many can come to church without much spirit at all.

Most of us do carry the meaning of Christmas with us in our hearts. We just probably carry other stuff, too. But that instinct to be charitable, generous, thoughtful, or courageous? That's much closer to the mark than fretting about pageants, music, or greetings. When in doubt, incarnating Christ is always a good choice.

With love,
Drew

CHRISTMAS

2023

FOR SUNDAY

Advent 4B & Christmas Eve

December 24, 2023

Collect

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

Reading

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

CHRISTMAS

Reflection

"Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

What a greeting! And like most of us, Mary hears it incredulously. We can imagine Mary being weirded out enough by the angel. But when they greet her with these words—which are both uncommon for a greeting and, let's be honest, fit strangely when you don't feel so favored by much of anyone.

The experience of Mary in the whole Incarnation Ordeal is a popular centerpiece for a lot of Christmas pondering. The most famous example being the song "Mary, Did You Know," which is loved and hated in equal measure. But the sense of *kinship* we try to find in Mary is both remarkable and predictable. She is just like each of us: at once typical and remarkable.

God favors her. *And is with her.*

I think we do struggle with how to understand all of this. Being special and common, favored and like everyone else. It reminds me of the trope of the regular girl picked to be a princess or the boy who gets to play for Notre Dame. People who long to be ordinary and extraordinary. To be special. To get picked.

What is remarkable about Mary is that she isn't. Neither are the shepherds in the fields. These aren't *special* people. But God is with them. Inviting them to join in a project. Showing favor to them when nobody else will.

This seems to be God's MO. Favor people when they aren't. Which means it isn't about who you are. It isn't part of our permanent identity! It is about the place we inhabit with God now. May you be blessed with God's favor today!

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