

The Case Against Christmas

By: Douglas Forrester

Crozet United Methodist Church

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Luke 2:1-20 (KJV)

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)

And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. 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:;) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

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. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 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.

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. 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.

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

And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

Almost exactly two weeks ago, I found myself in Saint Mary's Hospital in Richmond, the place where thirty-nine years and a day earlier, I had been born. I would like to tell you I was

there because they were marking the occasion by naming something after me. They were not. I was there because my mother was having surgery to repair a broken kneecap, the result of a slip on the ice.

On that day, the last thing I heard my mother say prior to surgery was a comment she made to a nurse just prior to being wheeled into the operating room. She said, "Thirty-nine years ago I left here with a baby. Please don't let that happen again. I thought it was funny until I realized she was talking about me.

Just prior to leaving the hospital to return to Crozet, I stopped by the hospital cafeteria to get a snack to eat in the car, and about five minutes into this process, I was pacing across the floor, not because I was worried about my mother, but because I was walking between the display case where the apples were kept and the shelf where they kept the cookies. I'm trying to eat healthier as of late, because I hope to end my thirties on a high note, and since I have less than a year to go, I figure it is time to start, but oh my, the power of the flesh. I chose the apple, but thought about the cookies the whole way home.

In all seriousness, I have been thinking about mortality a good deal lately. Two of our church members lost their fathers this autumn. My dad is about to turn 74 and 2009 saw my mother face the diagnosis of a heart condition and a now a pulverized patella. I don't sleep as well as I used to, and my metabolism is no longer firing on all cylinders, so I have to watch what I eat. Sometimes (and I hate to admit this), when I've been on the floor, playing with my children, it takes me two tries to get back on my feet. For years, I think I have believed that my body was not really aging, I was just going through a bad spell, and I would eventually get back to being young.

Therefore, when I look around me, and I think about my mother's broken body, or my work in hospitals; those havens for broken bodies. When I think about families broken by death and loss, or when I consider the struggles and temptations inherent in having our lives encased in these carnal, mortal bodies, I believe that one can make a convincing case against Christmas.

This case, of course, is nothing new. The idea that the human body is but a material, corrupt prison of the spirit predates the birth of Christ. Greek philosophers understood our higher, spiritual souls to be trapped inside these degrading, fleshy cages. Plato believed that through philosophical contemplation we could rise above our enslavement to what he considered our "lower nature" and the material world.¹

One of the Gentile religions that predated and then coexisted with Christianity was a faith called Gnosticism. The Gnostics eventually adopted Jesus as central to many of their myths, although he was a much different Jesus than we would recognize today. The Gnostics had no problem believing in the divine, transcendent Jesus, but to believe that Jesus was a human who experienced human pain and died a human death? No way. They did not believe it for a second. Why would God do this?

And here we are, twenty centuries later, gathered here together seeking something beyond ourselves, seeking something spiritual and mysterious. The church is always promising an alternative to what the world has to offer, so let's have it now. Let's gather together with an ancient story wrapped in familiar sights and sounds and smells and try to hear something that will give us hope, help us to ascend above and beyond the struggles that await us every day outside these doors. *Give us strength, O Lord. Give us peace, O Lord. Heal our broken flesh.*

¹ Willimon, William, "The Future of Flesh" in *Pulpit Resource*, December 20, 2009.

Heal our broken hearts. Heal our broken spirit. Give us a truly “spiritual” experience that enables us to somehow make sense of the material, the carnal, even the sensual.

The problem is that, try as we might to have an experience that is beyond the flesh, beyond ourselves, if we move in that direction on this night of nights, we will pass God coming the other way, because this night is not about our rise to a new plane of spiritual enlightenment. Tonight is about the God who created the universe, who set the planets in motion, who created earth and life and fresh strawberries shedding the garments of heaven and putting on *our* flesh, and living *our* lives *with us*.

And this is the case against Christmas: if the ancient philosophers are right, that the physical, carnal, material world is innately corrupt, broken, sinful, and the purpose of life is to rise above it; if we are right, assuming that the purpose of the spiritual life is to ascend above the mundane and the everyday, then from God’s perspective, leaving heaven to wear our flesh and experience our lives, was an utterly terrible idea.

I became a father for the second time some fourteen months ago, and I can remember a moment, when Claire was less than twenty-four hours old, when I was laying on my side with her on her back, watching her attempting to focus those big blue eyes on me, using my fingertips to gently stroke her cheekbones and trace the outline of her tiny face. The psalmist writes, “I praise you, Lord, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made,” and as I marvelled at how fearfully and wonderfully made my new daughter was, I leaned over to kiss her forehead, just above the bridge of her nose, and as I opened my lips to kiss her, she sneezed in my mouth.

Why would a God who needs nothing enter the realm of God’s creatures where people get their mouths sneezed into? It makes no sense. Given the human body’s propensity to fail, to wound, to die; given our propensity to alienate one another, to conspire against one another, to

exclude and hurt the feelings of one another, there is no good reason from God's perspective for God to get involved in this realm.

Had I somehow been one of God's trusted advisors in the heavenly host, I would have been one of the first to have raised an objection and made the case against Christmas to God. In this evening's text, Luke talks about "how there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.'" Had I been there, Luke would have also reported, "and there was one objection."

This is the case against Christmas: *You are doing what? Getting involved with them in a new way? How? Going to earth? Becoming a human?! How? YOU ARE SENDING YOUR SON? As a BABY? He is going to be born as they are? Consider the risk! And besides, don't you know what those people are like? They are mean to each other. They break each other's hearts. They often think only of themselves. They even physically harm one another, sometimes on a gigantic scale. This plan is far too dangerous. What if your son gets killed?*

You must admit. It is a pretty good case.

Yet where the case fails is where we realize that the incarnation of God as Jesus at Christmas has never, ever, not once, been about what is in it for God. Instead, the incarnation of God as Jesus at Christmas is nothing other than grace in its purest form. What God in this holy family, among an oppressed people in a small town, in an occupied land, first in the presence of shepherds who were outcasts, to parents about whom there were whispers, and who had nothing to offer but obedience and faith, God's love became real.

The Jews had laws and covenant, the Gentiles had philosophy and the search for transcendence, but for us, we have a Savior who lives our lives, suffers our pain, and dies our

death, and whose name means, and whose life demonstrates the meaning of Emmanuel: *God is with us.*

The case *for* Christmas is not that we desired salvation or that we were somehow worthy of incarnation. The case for Christmas is that God is love, and that God's love for us, undeserved though it may be, is so great, so *profound*, that there is no length to great for God to traverse, including humbly taking on our bodies and our lives and our death, to be here with us. Therefore we need not transcend this mortal flesh to experience the grace of God, because by the endless grace of God, our God is with us, even here, even now.

Gloria In Excelsis Deo.