

**WHAT DO WE TAKE AWAY FROM CHRISTMAS?  
LUKE 2: 1-20; ISAIAH 9: 2-7; ISAIAH 11: 1-6  
CHRISTMAS EVE  
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**Isaiah 9: 2-7**

*2 The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness--on them light has shined. 3 You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. 4 For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. 5 For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. 6 For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7 His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.*

**Isaiah 11: 1-6**

*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. 2 The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. 3 His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; 4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. 5 Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. 6 The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.*

**Luke 2: 1-20**

*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. 8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and 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 heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" 15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, for you are our rock and our Redeemer, God Emmanuel. Amen.

Some things never change. As we go back in time and imagine how Mary and Joseph must have felt that first Christmas, we may come closer than we think. If you flew into the Austin airport from the east this past week, you probably faced long lines, seemingly endless security checks and perhaps uncomfortable nights sleeping in a chair, if you were lucky to get one. Weary travelers far from home without a place to rest are much the same, regardless of their particular circumstances.

My sister and her husband live in Roanoke, Virginia. It took them three hours just to drive two miles home. Family members trying to fly into Roanoke were stranded in Atlanta for two days. My sister wonders if the airport staff gave her grandson a standby seat just to get rid of him.

People rescued from cars after hours without food, water and warmth understand what Mary and Joseph experienced over two thousand years ago. Travel is always a challenge, especially if you are pregnant and poor.

According to the scriptures, Mary and Joseph were required to go to Bethlehem. They had to register with the government. It was not a good time to travel. Like many people today, they were just doing what they had to do. Things happen. There was no room in the inn. They were glad to have a stable.

One of the lessons we take away from Christmas is that God comes to us in the midst of everyday life, when we are just doing what we have to do. God interrupts our lives and offers a gift, a gift of new life – a gift of hope, peace, love and joy – a gift that may seem ordinary but suddenly becomes extraordinary – a gift symbolized by the birth of Jesus which we celebrate tonight.

The notion of the divine entering human existence is not unique to Christianity. Romans and Greeks believed the gods sometimes had lovers and children who were human. Roman emperors were thought to be divine.

Muslim and Hindu faiths speak of the divine entering human form. The popular movie title “Avatar” is the name given to these divine beings in ancient Sanskrit texts ([Houston Chronicle](#), December 18, 2009, p. 6-7). According to Hinduism, divine beings like Khrisna are sent by the Hindu Supreme Being to create righteousness on earth.

Jesus was fully human and fully divine, not an Avatar created by human design or by another divine being. God became human so that we might better know God and know ourselves. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are offered the gift of knowing God in Jesus Christ, each in our own time and place.

Christ’s birth is a mystery, a mystery we are invited to enter and explore tonight. The mystery of Christmas lies on the frontier between what we know and can explain and what we experience but cannot explain (Gomes, [The Good Book](#), 367). Phillip Brooks entered the mystery in 1866 as he approached Bethlehem on Christmas Eve (Reynolds, [The Spirit of Christmas](#), 53). He imagined what it might have been like on the first Christmas Eve. Two years later Pastor Phillips wrote about the experience for a Sunday school class at Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia. The organist of his church put the words to music, and a children’s choir first sang what we know as “O Little Town of Bethlehem” on Christmas Day, 1868.

*O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie;  
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent years go by.*

*Yet in thy dark streets shineth the ever lasting Light;  
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*

*For Christ is born of Mary and gathered all above;  
While mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love.  
O morning stars together proclaim the holy birth,  
And praises sing to God the King and peace to all on earth.*

*O holy child of Bethlehem descend on us, we pray;  
Cast out our sin and enter in; be born in us today.  
We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings tell.  
O come to us, abide in us, our Lord Emmanuel!*

Philosophers throughout history have questioned the gift we celebrate tonight. How could a marginal Jew living in the first century, born in a backwater province of the Roman empire, possibly be the full and complete revelation God? (Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1, 118). Why would God, the ultimate power in the universe, come into the world as a baby born to Mary?

It does not make sense according to the power structure and thinking of the day – the power structures and thinking of the 1<sup>st</sup> century nor those of this century. Yet we come tonight and hear the scriptural proclamation that the first baby steps of Jesus fulfill the age-old covenant promise in Leviticus 26:12 *And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people* (Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1, 118).

A baby – a gift – God breaking into a particular time and place – but there is more. The scriptures describe a spiritual phenomenon. Somehow *chronos*, time as we know it, and *kairos*, the time of eternity, become one (Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1, 119). The separation between the heavenly and earthly realms of existence disappears. Angels, messengers from God, reveal the ultimate eternal reality that God is with us in Jesus Christ.

And there is more – this revelation which we know as Christmas was first given not to those who are powerful and worthy, but to people on the margin of society. The God we meet in the scriptures tonight breaks all the rules of philosophical reason and power politics.

What do we take away from Christmas? A lot depends on us. We can make the science and reason of this century our god and push the revelation aside. We can join our society's fascination with busyness and not give Christ much time or thought. We can work, play, twitter and text our lives away and fit right in with the world around us.

On the other hand we might decide tonight to enter into the mystery. Harvard Chaplain Peter Gomes (The Good Book) believes that the scriptures offer an opportunity to explore the mystery we know as God in Jesus Christ. Gomes says we will not solve the mystery. The deeper we go, the more we will discover. The birth of Jesus is just the beginning.

We can decide to take the baby Jesus away with us tonight. We are invited to take Christ's light of hope, peace, love and joy into the darkness of the world. If we do, we should be ready for surprise and transformation.

Christ is always making things new. Challenges become blessings. The light of Christ's love transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary.

If we take the light of Christ with us, we will see people on the margins of society. God has a special concern for them. If we enter into the mystery that is God in Jesus Christ, we will care for others in tangible ways. We will offer hope to people who walk in darkness.

Jesus wants a relationship with us and through us, a relationship with others. If we take Jesus home with us tonight, we will find that our relationships with others will change. If we enter the mystery of Christmas, we will take the light of Christ into our homes, into our places of work and into our schools and neighborhoods. We are invited to take Christ's light of love into our community and into the world.

No matter what happens, God is with us, waiting to love and be loved. What do we take away from Christmas? I hope we take away Jesus, as if he were a baby we cradle in our arms. I hope we take away the light and love he offers. It is a gift to us. The gift reflects who God thinks we are and who God thinks we may become. The birth of Jesus is a gift to you, to me and to the world.

Let us pray. O holy child of Bethlehem, descend on us we pray. Inspire us by your Spirit, so that we take Christ with us long after the Christmas celebration is over. Teach us to love others, dear Jesus. Show us how to light our world with your love. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.