***TO US A CHILD IS BORN!***

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Texts: Isaiah 9:2b-3, 6-7 and Titus 2:11-14

It is the last line of that Christmas classic, *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, the words shouted defiantly by the slightly disheveled angel Gladys with her skinny legs and dirty sneakers sticking out from beneath her costume: *Hey! Unto you a child is born!* That is the good news of Christmas, the good news of a child’s birth who is not just any child but a child born for us, *to us*, as the angel Gladys proclaims. They are words that had echoed across the centuries before Jesus’ birth, words spoken by the prophet Isaiah:

*To us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder and his name will be called “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”*

“He’d never get out of the first grade if he had to write all that!” said Gladys’ sister Imogene who was playing Mary in the pageant. “I would have named him Bill.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Perhaps Mary would have named him “Bill” too, but the name Jesus – Yeshua in the Hebrew – was chosen by God for this child because the name is rooted in the promise the child brings: *the Lord saves*! “The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all,” we hear from the letter to Titus. Grace and salvation for all, for to ***all of us*** a child is born!

That universal claim, to *all of us* a child is born, finds expression in art in nativity scenes set amid Italian countrysides, African villages, and Asian homes. It finds expression in music as in the early Canadian hymn, *‘Twas in the Moon of Wintertime*, written in the Huron language for the Huron people by a French missionary:

*O children of the forest free, O you of Manitou:*

*the holy child of earth and heaven is born today for you.*

*Come kneel before the radiant boy*

*who brings you beauty, peace, and joy*.

*Jesus, your king, is born; Jesus is born. In excelsis Gloria!*

Their king, our king, the world’s king, for to ***all of us*** a child is born!

I am afraid that the Christmas wars around his coming have often muddled the message that is central to his birth. Folks who are busy arguing about whether to say “Merry Christmas” or “Happy Holidays” belie the tidings of great joy that he brings for all people and forget that he calls us to love all our neighbors and contradict his coming as the Prince of Peace who would much rather see us live in peace with one another than argue about Merry Christmas! As Matt Rawle well notes:

*We keep Christ in Christmas not through bumper stickers or anger toward coffee cups or making sure city hall has the largest Christmas tree; rather Christ is with us in our invitation, in our selflessness, our service, and our humble witness. If there is a war on Christmas, it is a civil war between those who embody “O come let us adore him,” and those who are upset that the angels didn’t make their prophetic announcement in a department store.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

We keep Christ in Christmas by living as Jesus calls us to live, by sharing the love in which he came to us, by pursuing the peace and goodwill of which the angels sang. That is the hard work of keeping Christmas – much harder than shopping for the right gift or baking another dozen cookies or getting the angel straight on the top of the tree or keeping *Jingle Bells* from playing from your tie during the sermon. Much of Christmas these days has very little to do with Christ, and Christ might have very little to do with much of our practice of Christmas.

Every year in his church in Port Glasgow, Scotland, Father Simon Keane set up a Nativity scene with life-sized figures: Mary and Joseph, a flock of shepherds, three wise men, and in the manger a doll representing the baby Jesus. One December night as Father Keane entered the dimly lit sanctuary, he heard a baby crying. The cry seemed to be coming from the manger. Tip-toeing forward, he discovered a real baby in the manger. As he lifted the child from the bed of straw, he caught sight of a little girl cradling the doll which served as the Nativity’s baby Jesus; the girl had a look of great tenderness on her face. As the priest approached her, the young girl said apologetically: “I just wanted to hold the baby Jesus, so I laid my wee brother in the manger so that it wouldn’t be empty.”

No one wants the manger to be empty at Christmas. An empty manger is the manger without the Christ-child, a silent night without the holy infant so tender and mild, hillside shepherds undisturbed by angel voices, wise men without a star to follow. An empty manger declares that to us no child is born. To us no son is given. An empty manger leaves the dark streets of the little town of Bethlehem dark, without any everlasting light. An empty manger silences joy to the world and gives the faithful no reason to come, for if the manger is empty then the Lord has not come and Christmas is not coming. Emptiness alone is not necessarily bad; after all, an empty tomb is the culmination of our hopes. But an empty manger is a manger without the hope of the world who came for all of us!

The good news of Christmas is that the manger is not empty. It is full of the love of God incarnate in a baby, full of the Word who was with God in the beginning, full with the light no darkness can overcome, full with the One for whom the world waited for centuries, full with the One who was and is the messiah of God. The manger is full of our hope wrapped in olive skin wrapped in swaddling clothes nestled in the hay of a simple feed box. He is the one of whom angels sing, the child of Mary and the Son of God, our savior. Not only to Mary and Joseph, but also ***to us*** this child is born!

This holy child is not so very different from the wee boy laid by his sister in the straw in that Port Glasgow nativity. He came into the world with all the frailties, needs, and innocence of newborn humanity. The baby Jesus was bathed and burped, fed and nurtured, by human hands like those that cared for the Scottish girl’s baby brother. The child in the Bethlehem manger was the Son of God, but he was also the son of Mary – as fully human as the little lad in Port Glasgow. He was not some deity clothed in human skin, a god in disguise. He was truly human. To us a child – a real child – is born. The miracle is that he is the Messiah of God, Christ the Lord.

He comes to change the lives of those to whom he is born; he comes to be the center of our attention, not a sideshow. He comes, not so that we can celebrate his birth and then go on to other things, but so that we might commit our hearts to him. In his birth he has reached out to each of us with a tender hand that grasps us with a love that will not let us go; in his death and resurrection he has offered us salvation with those same hands pierced by the nails of the cross. The manger to which you journey is not empty. It is full of God’s love, God’s peace and God’s hope alive in the hands of a child born to all of us.

This child no longer surprises us. We’ve been waiting for him for about 364 days now. We take for granted his arrival; we come to offer greetings, sing our carols, and then turn from the stable’s light and wander back into the darkness in which we live most of the year. Our joy is short-lived. After two thousand years we have lost any real expectation of his coming again. We are no more prepared for his coming than were the Bethlehem villagers who slept undisturbed through that silent, holy night when he was born.

The writer of the letter to Titus was very much aware that in the first century as in the 21st century it was a challenge to be patient and wait and watch for Jesus’ return. He encouraged the people on Crete then and us today to wait and to watch, but he urges us to do so as those to whom Christ has already come:

*While we wait for the blessed hope and manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, renounce impiety and worldly passions, and live self-controlled, upright and godly lives.*

Now that may not seem like the best way to celebrate Christmas – with self-control; if anything Christmas is a season in which we lack self-control and eat and drink and shop to excess, necessitating some of those New Year’s resolutions soon-to-come. But the self-control in that letter to Titus is over against an ethic that says you do whatever makes you feel good. It is self-control that causes you to stop, think and ask “is this what God wants me to do?” before pressing “send” on your tweet or email. It is a godly life that seeks to please God more than to impress the world. We who celebrate Jesus’ birth and await his return in glory are called to be the kind of people Jesus showed us how to be – faithful, loving, joyful, humble, self-sacrificing – for what is the value in coming to celebrate the birth of this child if we walk away from the manger unwilling to heed the good news that he brings and to live as he urges us to live!

This Christmas will you dare to welcome the infant Jesus and make him the center of your life not just for a day but for a lifetime? Will you hold him in your heart and prepare for his return in glory, living and loving as he calls you to live and to love? He comes to bring you great joy, great hope, and great peace, not just for one silent night, but for all your nights and days! Hey, to you and to you and to you…and to all of you is born this child, this son, this savior, who is Christ the Lord. Amen

1. Barbara Robinson, *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, Harper & Row:1972, pp.64-65 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Matt Rawle, *The Redemption of S*crooge, Abingdon Press: Nashville, 2016, p.136 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)