

The Lessons of Christmas

1.

Carol

God becomes one of us? "Preposterous!" you say. The Creator of the universe with flesh and bones? That's kind of a step down, isn't it? It seems incredible, improbable, outrageous, even scandalous! And why? What was to be gained? Being human is pretty wonderful and all, but God condescending to that degree? After all, He is the One who says about Himself....

**To whom will you compare me?
Or who is my equal?
Lift your eyes and look to the heavens.
Who created all these?
He who brings out the starry host one by one,
and calls them each by name.**

Was it just curiosity that caused God to become a newborn baby? Surely the reason was more profound than that! He's God, after all! He could have written his message in the sky, for all that matter. And it would have been a whole lot less messy, and certainly a whole lot safer. What was so important that God would risk sending his Son on such a mission? He knows everything - particularly the darkness of our hearts. He knew about Satan, and his chokehold on humanity. Why not just leave "bad enough" alone?

We know the answer. And that's why we get all choked up when we sing Silent Night, or rejoice with the village of Bethlehem that they were chosen to house the Son of God, even if most of them didn't have a clue he was there. Christmas is a reminder that God gets personally involved in our mess down here. Immanuel isn't just a nice sounding name. It describes who He is - God with us - God come down.

And because of the personal nature of God, we must respond personally to him. Respond with Joy. Respond with faith. Respond with submission. Respond with awe. O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord.

2.

Carol

First Lesson

God announces in the Garden of Eden
that the seed of the woman will bruise the serpent's head

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, **“Where are you?”**

Adam answered, **“I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid.”**

And God said, **“Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I told you not to eat from?”**

The man said, **“The woman you put here with me - she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.”**

The Lord God said to the woman, **“What is this you have done?”**

The woman said, **“The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”**

So the Lord God said to the serpent, **“Because you have done this, cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals! You will crawl on your belly, and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers; HE will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”**

PRAYER

O Lord, our ability to rebel is limitless. And our sin creates such a mess! Every boundary set for us is for our good, yet over and over we turn your glory into shame. Our hearts really **are** wicked. And then we assume that we can run from you, and hide what we have done. Forgive our foolish ways, O God. Help us to see that to walk in your paths is life and health and peace. To live by the boundaries you have set is the smartest thing we can ever do, but to make our own rules is to die, inch by inch, day by day. Keep us from temptation. Don't let us give in to the soothing, seemingly rational whispers of the Evil One. You know what is best, and we submit to your care. Help us to listen to you, and only you.

3.

Carol

Second Lesson

Isaiah announces that Israel is about to see God fulfill His promise

“Comfort, comfort my people,” says your God. “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.”

A voice of one calling,

“In the desert, prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain, every hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout. Lift it up, do not be afraid! Say to the towns of Judah, “Here is your God!”

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.

PRAYER

Lord, your promises are beyond all we could ever ask or imagine. They seem too good to be true, but we know you to be an all-powerful God. Nothing is too difficult for you. You have acted miraculously in the past, and you are the same yesterday, today and forever. Your promises never fail. They are always yes in Jesus Christ.

In this room tonight are some who need a word of comfort. Speak that word. Speak it twice, even! Let some know here for the first time that their sin has been paid for, that they have received from the Lord’s hand double for all their sins.

Some of us face huge, seemingly unclimable mountains. Level them for us, so that with your help we can easily scale them. Come into the rugged places of our lives and smooth out the path for us. Jesus, you are the good shepherd who loves to care for his sheep. Thank you for the way you guide us and lead us all our lives long, and even forever more.

4.

Carol

Third Lesson

Christ's birth and kingdom are foretold by Isaiah

The great English preacher C.H. Spurgeon once witnessed a storm in all its fury. "It was a dark night, he recalled, "and the sky was covered with thick clouds, and the stars were difficult to make out; but at one particular time, I noticed far away on the horizon, as if miles across the water, a bright glow, like gold. It was the moon, hidden behind the clouds, so that she could not shine upon us, but she was able to send her rays down upon the far distant waters, where no cloud were. Surely the words of Isaiah were birthed at such a time; he heard prophetic thunders roaring – they came out of his very mouth - and he saw the lightening flashes of divine vengeance; clouds and darkness had for many years punctuated history; but he saw far away a bright spot—one place where the clear shining came down from heaven. And he sat down, and he penned these words: **"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;"** And though everywhere Isaiah looked he could only see the carnage, clamor, conflict and garments soaked with blood, he nonetheless fixed his eye upon one bright spot in the future, full of hope, peace, prosperity and blessedness. **"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 Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.**

PRAYER

Like fumbling for a light switch in a darkened room, we know that finding and flipping that switch the darkness must flee. And so by faith, Lord, even in the middle of the bleakest circumstances we face tonight, we call on you to flood our darkness with light, illuminating every corner with the glory of your presence.

Shine on us, Lord Jesus. Turn our despair into praise, bind up the brokenhearted, provide freedom those in bondage to sin. We ask for a garland of beauty instead of ashes, and gladness instead of mourning.

5.

Carol

Fourth Lesson

The angel Gabriel appears to Joseph

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, **“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”**

All this took place to fulfill what the lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel - which means ‘God with us.’” When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the lord commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

PRAYER

Thank you for your plans, Father. And because your name is Immanuel, God with us, you see to it that your plans for us are fulfilled. There is no question that they often surprise us, and even shock us at times. We thank you for the big picture that you are achieving in us, and through us. And since we see only part of the whole, give us faith to trust that you know exactly what you are doing with our lives. Just like Joseph, reassure us of your love and care. And just he did, help us to relax in your plans, joyfully and eagerly accepting them as from you, and good. May your will is done in us, for only then will our ultimate peace and satisfaction be realized. It is in the name of your Son Jesus, whose life was all about your will, we pray, AMEN.

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Fifth Lesson

The angel salutes the blessed Virgin Mary

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, **"Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."** Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, **"Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."**

"How will this be, Mary asked the angel, **"since I am a virgin?"**

The angel answered, **"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the most high will overshadow you. So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."** **"I am the Lord's servant,** Mary answered. **"May it be to me as you have said."** Then the angel left her.

PRAYER

May it be to me as you have said. I like to think that I would do anything for you, Lord, or go anywhere, that I would give up everything for you. But I know my heart, and it is all too easy for me to draw the line and say, "Lord, no more. I've given enough." Jesus, you left heaven. You laid your glory aside for a while and took on flesh and bones and frailty. You didn't say to the Father, "that's too much to ask." And neither did Mary. In the days ahead, when we think about the phrase, "I surrender all," may we come to a broader understanding of what "all" might mean for us. And may our hearts leap at the opportunities before us. May it be to us, Lord, as you have said.

8.

Carol

Sixth Lesson

Luke tells of the birth of Jesus

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone went to his own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the child to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

9.

Carol

10.

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Seventh Lesson

The shepherds go to the manger

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, **“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”** Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, **“GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST, AND ON EARTH PEACE TO MEN ON WHOM HIS FAVOR RESTS.”**

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the lord has told us about.”

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word

concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

11.

Carol

12.

Carol

Eighth Lesson

John unfolds the great mystery of the Incarnation

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God - children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

13.

Carol

