

## He Comes

Matthew 1:18-23

The Longest Night – December 21, 2011

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There's a well-documented phenomenon in which people get so excited (or at least so worked up) about the Christmas holiday, that the day *after* Christmas, they go into a bit of a depression. There's been so much buildup, so much activity, so much stress for so long, and then suddenly, nothing. They don't know what to do with themselves. It isn't like a wedding, where you have all the activity and buildup and stress, and then after the big event you get to go on a vacation, specifically to wind down. After Christmas, there's nothing except families departing for home and hastily-bought gifts returned to still-crowded shopping centers. No more huge feasts: it's only leftovers now, and someone has eaten all of your favorite dessert. The Christmas movies aren't on TV anymore, and the music on all the radio stations has gone back its less-festive normalcy. On the 26<sup>th</sup>, the decorations start to come down, trash hauled out to the curb. Where there was eager anticipation over gifts to be given or received, now there are only advertisements for diet plans and fitness centers. And emotions begin to fall.

But for some of us, the disappointment happens much sooner. For some of us, the Christmas carols blaring on the radio and in the grocery store and everywhere else we go just feel out of place, because we aren't feeling 100% festive. Some of us are grieving, and the holiday just reminds us of what we have lost. Some of us are suffering broken relationships, and the picturesque images of families gathered happily around a table stab at our hearts. Some of us are worried, and it seems irresponsible to celebrate when we don't know what tomorrow will bring. Some of us are sick, and all we want for Christmas is to be healed. Some of us can't stop thinking about all the troubles of the world: wars and natural disasters and oppression of every kind, people suffering all around. Some of us just feel totally overwhelmed by the expectations of the season, or the expectations of the world. And these things don't respect the calendar – grief and brokenness and worry and hopelessness and overwhelming don't take a break because it's Christmas. So what are we to do? How do we celebrate this holy day with integrity? How do we honor Christ's birth without denying the reality within ourselves?

I think the answer lies in the Christmas story itself. You see, it wasn't all picture-perfect in Bethlehem that night. Mary and Joseph were poor, they were worried, they were lonely, they had no place to go. She must have been terrified, this young girl about to give birth so far from home, without a mother or a sister to hold her hand and tell her everything would be okay. He must have felt like a fool to believe her, that the child was a product of the Holy Spirit, not the result of adultery. And here they were, in humble circumstances, bringing a child into the world. And not only that, but a child who was said to be a King, so the reigning king, the political king was out to get them – and while they spent the first few days of Jesus' life among the animals in the stable, they spent the first few years as refugees in a foreign land. It wasn't what anyone expected for the Savior of the World. Is this what the prophets had foretold for so many years? A poor baby refugee and two worried, exhausted parents?

Jesus wasn't what the world expected. They wanted a king of a more traditional kind: one who would rule with a strong hand. They wanted a general whose army could protect them against all enemies. They wanted a superhero who could solve all their problems, eliminate the oppression they had endured for years, end violence, fix the economy, educate their children, restore their

families, bring peace to their lives. And what they got was a poor refugee baby, born among stable animals in a poor suburb of Jerusalem.

And maybe this is why Christmas doesn't always satisfy us, too: because it's often not what we're looking for. We want gifts to restore relationships and holiday meals to bring people together. We want the lights and the festivities to take away our pain and make the problems of the world stop even if just for a few minutes, and Christmas celebrations can't do that – they can't sweep in and fix everything. God didn't sweep in and fix everything. He came in the body of a child, a body like ours: vulnerable, troubled, grieving, worried. He came to set things right, of course, but not on our timetable – not in the way we wanted.

But perhaps God knows best. Perhaps God knew that a superhero could only last so long or cover so much area, that a mighty military ruler or a king might eventually give in to corruption. Or that overpowering oppressors wouldn't soften the hard places in people's souls that cause them to hurt one another. Or that to force us into wholeness wouldn't be wholeness at all. So instead of sending a superhero, **God came**. God came to be with us, to be with us in our struggle, to be with us in our pain, to be with us in our worry, to be with us in our hopelessness, to be with us in our grief. The Creator of the universe came to be with us.

And still he comes. Not because we're ready, not because our trees are appropriately trimmed or our houses perfectly decorated, not because we've put all the right gifts into all the right packages, not because we have all the right people gathered around our tables, not because our hearts are necessarily glad with the tidings of the season. He comes not because we're ready, but because he loves us and has since the creation of the world, since we were formed from the dust of the earth, since we were knit together in our mother's womb. He comes so we will know we are not alone, so we can face the darkness of the night knowing that the light will come, and with it, joy like we have never known.

The real gift of Christmas cannot be found in stores, or hanging on mantles or sung by the greatest choirs. The gift of Christmas is that when we pray, "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus," he comes. When we cry, "God be near," God is already closer than our breath. When we ask for help, we are already being held up by arms stronger than we can imagine. Christmas is not about gathering with loved ones, however wonderful, for meals, however large; it's not about honoring them with gifts procured or created, however lavish; it's not about finally receiving what we've always wanted, as if that's even possible. **The real gift of Christmas is that God has come near, that God is with us, Emmanuel**, in this season and always; that God has brought light into our darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. The days from here out will always grow brighter, because Christ has come into the world and into our lives. No matter how we've tried to hide, God has found us again and again and said, "You are mine. You are my own child, my beloved. I am with you."

Corrie ten Boom was a little Dutch lady who helped Jews escape the Nazis during World War II, and with her sister, Betsy, was put into a concentration camp. Betsy eventually died from the sufferings she endured there, but before her journey on this earth ended, she said to Corrie, "You must go all over the world and tell people what we have discovered here. You must tell them that *there is no pit so deep that God is not deeper still*. And they will believe you, because you have been here." There is no place God has not come; there is no struggle God has not endured. Even on this night of long darkness, there is no place that you walk alone. And while having a "holly jolly Christmas" might seem absurd this year, perhaps you might find a glimmer of hope in Emmanuel, in God with us, however deep the pit you are in. Perhaps you will find hope knowing that light has come and is coming, and the darkness cannot overcome it. We are not alone. God is with us. Emmanuel is coming. Amen.