



# Merry Christmas

## Our Down to Earth God

*by Paul Anderson*

What makes Christmas so special? Bringing together family and friends? No other holiday draws us together as much. The giving of gifts? No season brings out the best in us more. A beautiful tree, a sparkling home, Swedish meatballs? No scene captures the warmth that Christmas evokes.

And yet these highlights were strikingly absent on the first Christmas. We gather with family—Joseph and Mary left theirs and traveled to a distant city. We sit by a fire—they met in something like a cave. We invite friends over—shepherds they had never met were their only visitors.

We try to be understanding with those carrying children. The holy family made the ninety-mile trek during the last part of Mary's pregnancy. We get off work. Shepherds were on the job and inns were crowded because of tax season.

It doesn't sound like Christmas. It was a difficult day for the Messiah's mom—and profoundly significant, an event to be celebrated for all ages. It was stripped of all the wrappings, all those

special things that help to decorate the season. Couldn't God have done better? Yes, He could have sounded forth the news for all to hear. He could have brought His Son to earth in a blaze of glory, accompanied by a multitude of angels. He could have—and He will. The Second Advent of Jesus will make Olympic fireworks look like a puff of smoke in comparison. Every eye will see Him, and the world will hear the trumpet blast. St. Paul says that He will be "revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire" (2 Thess. 1:7).

Why not the first time? Because God was saying something loud and clear, so He announced it quietly and cloaked it in mystery. The medium is the message. How He did it tells us what He wants to say. It is so consistent throughout the Christmas story and with the rest of Scripture that we must work to miss it. But we have, and we do, because it takes us by surprise. It flies in the face of the way we often think. So what is the message, and how did God proclaim it at Christmas? First...

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**God delivers us from our sin, not our situation.** The angel told Joseph to name the baby Jesus, “for he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). We want God to make us cozy—He comes to make us clean. We want Him to improve our standing with people—He comes to make us right with Himself. We’d like a little more pleasure, a little less pain. He promises an abundant life—that includes death to self. We want our circumstances to change and God goes deeper—He wants our hearts to change.

God could have given Mary an easy ride, a nice palace for the King of kings to be born in, a sterile room rather than a manger smelling like cow-dung, but that would have distorted the message. It would have equated the Christmas proclamation with success, comfort, and riches. We have enough trouble battling that message as it is. If things are

than pleasure, more rejection than acceptance, more loneliness than togetherness—be of good cheer. You may be closer to the real meaning of Christmas than the rest of us, especially if you are able to present your sorrow to God as a sacrifice of praise. You may be closer to the Rejected One, the one who had everything but “emptied himself,” the one who came to His own but was not received.

I once saw a bumper sticker that read, “God has been good to me,” and I had mixed emotions. If that driver can separate the blessings from the Blessor, then God be praised. St. Paul knew how to be abased and how to abound, seeing both as the good hand of God. When Job was wealthy, he trusted in God. When he lost it all, he said, “The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” We do not equate

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not going our way, we wonder if God is against us. We expect to find Him more readily in the sanctuary than on the street. There are those who preach a message of ease, but it was not on the lips of Jesus. He was homeless at birth and property-less in life. He had no place to lay His head as an itinerant minister, and He died penniless.

Henri Nouwen, Roman Catholic priest and author of numerous Christian books, wrote, “O Lord, how hard it is to accept your way. You come to me as a small, powerless child born away from home. You live for me as a stranger in your own land. You die for me as a criminal outside the walls of the city...As I prepare to celebrate your birth, I try to feel loved, accepted and at home in this world. I try to overcome the feelings of alienation and separation which continue to assail me. But I wonder if my deep sense of homelessness does not bring me closer to you than my occasional feelings of belonging. Where do I truly celebrate your birth? In a cozy home or in an unfamiliar house? Among welcoming friends or among unknown strangers? With feelings of well-being or with feelings of loneliness?”

I am happy for those who have a warm home this Christmas; so do we. But those of you who don't, those who are experiencing more pain

blessings with the central message of Christianity, or we, like Job's wife, may see a major disconnect between the sorrows of life and Savior of the world.

What will you work harder for this Christmas, the setting or the deeper significance? The essence of the Christmas proclamation is clearly not the former because it was noticeably absent. So whatever your circumstances, do you have Christ? Tree or no tree, fire or no fire, meatballs or no meatballs, pain or no pain. If you have Christ, then “Merry Christmas!” He is worth celebrating.

Relatives told us a few years ago, “We decided not to have a tree this year. We wanted to simplify everything so we could go for the real meaning. We also decided to help the homeless, but since they have plenty of help now, we're going to get involved during Epiphany.” No tree? What's Christmas without a tree? According to Jerry and Grace, Christmas without a tree was what Christmas is with a tree—Christ! The real tree came thirty-three years later.

St. John is clear: Jesus “appeared so that he might take away our sins” (1 John 3:5). That message is all over the Christmas story. Mary spoke in her song about God her Savior. Zechariah prophesied that his son would go before

the Messiah “to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins” (Luke 1:77). The angel announced that “in the town of David a Savior (had) been born.” And old Simeon held Jesus in his arms and announced, “My eyes have seen your salvation.” How kind of God to see our deepest need, deliverance from sin, and meet it by sending us His Son.

It is holiness, not happiness, that was highest on His list of priorities for us. But nothing impacts happiness more. Jesus was the happiest man who ever lived, because He was the holiest (Hebrews 1). And nothing impacts our situation more than God dealing with our sin. And the way He comes to us at Christmas does say something significant about our circumstances, not just about our sin. God comes after us from the inside out. But it does affect the outside. This means that...

**God delivers us from our situation, not just our sin.** Mary, the peasant girl, caught the impact of God’s choice and declared in her hymn of praise, “He has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden...He has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away” (Luke 1:48,52,53).

Jesus announced the same message the first chance He had to speak in His hometown. Quoting from Isaiah, He said that God had anointed Him “to preach the gospel to the poor” (Luke 4:18). He told John as proof that He was the Messiah that “the poor have the gospel preached to them.” Apparently, the lower class was not being given much consideration when Jesus came on the scene. His concern for the poor was so markedly different from society as a whole that it was a token of His divine appointment. Their theology of blessing predisposed them to disregard the poor. But Jesus taught people to invite the poor for dinner rather than the well-to-do. He said that the basis of judgment would be our treatment of the least of His brethren. He so identified with the lowly that to minister to them was tantamount to serving Him. That is a radical message for those who viewed the disadvantaged as spiritual dropouts.

Some still do. But God tells us how He feels about them by putting the seed of His Son in a



poor woman and by announcing the birth to poor shepherds. By going to Bethlehem rather than to Jerusalem, to shepherds rather than to kings, God was proclaiming a deliberate message, “I come to humble places, to humble people, and in humble ways.” By showing His heart through the prophets for the disadvantaged, the orphans, the widows, and the oppressed,

He was demonstrating His concern for their situation, not just their sin.

Don’t miss the presence because of the place. We have well-polished nativity scenes, but the nativity scene Mary was a part of was anything but picturesque. We don’t create heaven on earth to make it suitable for God. He comes into the darkness, dirtiness, and brokenness of our lives, sanctifying our lowly place by His presence. Neither do we conjure up His presence by denying our situation and escaping, at least in our minds, to a stained-glass atmosphere. If Jesus was comfortable in the feeding trough, He is comfortable with us. That is the powerful message of the incarnation: God is with us.

He also comes to humble people. Don’t miss the Presence in the people. They are surprisingly ordinary, like you and me. When God puts His hand on us, we usually respond, “Who, me?” We think that we are too common, but that is the kind of people God picks. Mary rejoiced that God had regard for her lowly estate. God often has a problem convincing regular people that they are proper tools for divine work. Had He wanted to do it differently, He would not have shown up at Bethlehem, nor used the greeters that He did.

He also comes in humble ways. He didn’t have a press conference, and He didn’t fly in dignitaries. Caesar Augustus was mentioned in the announcement, but he wasn’t invited to the big event. Neither was the religious establishment from the Holy City. God often does things differently than we expect, and we can miss Him. “God could not be here; I feel miserable, and this place is a dump.” But God seems more comfortable in the commonplace than in the extravagant, at least He did at Christmas.

The more I have dealt with the poor, the less I have been able to pigeonhole people. Do you know

how it feels to be poor, to have your very future at stake? You cannot provide for your family. You don't know where you will live next week. Your human dignity has hit rock bottom. You get up in the morning and you don't want to face your family. You become a worm. God loves such people, and He wants us to show them His love. He came to them—and for them.

The mother of Jesus was poor. Why? It could have been unwise spending, a bad harvest, warfare, a disaster, a generational problem, or the oppression of the rich. But whatever the problem with the poor, the Church is called to be the solution, to let them know that God is concerned about their situation. The Bible doesn't speak against riches, but does speak against greed, materialism, and indifference to the poor. Riches are not evil but riches are dangerous. The rich man who stored up for the future was not called a capitalist—he was called a fool. He thought his wealth brought security.

Talking about the homeless at Christmas time may seem unfair. “Not when we're having apple



pie and opening presents and singing Christmas carols.” But understand, I am not trying to ruin your Christmas. Rather, I want to see God break in like you have not seen before, so that regardless of the setting, you can experience the reality of Christ.

Swaddling cloths were all God used to wrap His gift. Whether we receive anything else or not, we can all have Christ. God came to the least and the lowest to show us that we all qualify for His grace. He's not leaving anyone out, and certainly not the poor. I am convinced that the more we care for the poor, the more we will understand the message of the Gospel. We will become more soft, less judgmental, less opinionated, more forgiving, more human, more caring—and therefore more able to receive the grace of God in our lives.

Can you imagine someone saying something like this: “It won't be much of a Christmas this year. I'm away from home and friends. I am in a town that I am unfamiliar with. I am in a sort of dirty place, and I am hurting and lonely.”

Wait a minute. That almost sounds like the first Christmas.

*Merry Christmas!*