

## HOW HE CAME

How we come and why we come to Advent are surely interesting, at least to us. But it pales to insignificance in comparison to how and why Jesus came. How we come is broken-hearted. Why we come is because we seek healing for all that is wrong within and around us, but also because we are creatures of LIFE and LIGHT, and the light of Christmas draws us with an unearthly power. Nevertheless, how and why He came are both the reason for our coming and, as always, dimensions beyond us.

I certainly would not want to minimize the importance of our response to Christmas. While it is true that all prior generations have managed to live their lives, search for truth, and make their witness without any help from us – while it is true that all the deeds, proclamations, writings, and expressions of faith which have guided our steps have come before we got here – it is nevertheless true that little of this power and light will seep through to coming generations unless we awaken to it, respond to it, and carry it in our time also. A chain with a missing link has already come to its end.

I think, for instance, of what the Christmas celebrations will be like in Turkey this year – in Asia Minor, where the early church was shaped, formed, found its wings and, with blood and travail and hope and an incredible faith, spread its news of a New Life and a New WAY across its own land and into all the known world. What will Christmas be like in Turkey this year – in the land of the Ephesians, Colossians, Galatians, and Philemon; of Antioch and Tarsus; of Nicaea and Constantinople – the land of Paul's birth and most of his ministry?

Christmas in Turkey will be a vast and profound silence. It no longer matters there how many lived and died for Jesus' sake, how many found the light of Christ, how many wept for joy at the new freedom that was theirs, how many found love and joy in the midst of the incredible chaos and alienation of this world. There came a generation which no longer carried it, which no longer responded to the light of Christ, which no longer was willing to live or die for it. Now Christmas and Christianity are silenced in that land. No indeed, I do *not* want to minimize the importance of our response to Christmas.

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Turkey is a wonderful place, with wonderful people, and they have a great religion of their own ... so what does it matter? What does it matter? I'm not the only one to ask or give answer to that question. All of us give answer to that question every day of our lives. Every generation gives answer to that question, whether they intend to or not.

Nevertheless, we are not the only ones who come to Christmas. Another One comes – He who makes it what it is. The great mystery and power – the source of the light that draws us – may be reflected but are not found in the how and the why we come. They are found in the how and the why our Lord comes. Indeed, it can be said that one of the strangest and most surprising things about the true Christmas is that it tends to draw us beyond ourselves. That is miracle and mystery indeed. And when that begins to happen – against all our instincts and assumptions and expectations – *we like it!* Life somehow becomes cleaner, more joyous, more alive, full of promise, and laced with excitement and adventure. Against all expectations, we like life better when it is Christ-centered than when it is self-centered. Some of us even like life better Christ-centered than nation-centered, job-centered, or family-centered. Idolatry is not simply wrong; it ends up being not much fun, either.

But I dally, and I don't have much time today. So I need to forget all subtlety and finesse and just tell you as fast and straight as I can what the message is for today: HOW DOES JESUS COME? It is a vast and fascinating topic. Why that point in time – that particular year in earth's history? Why that place on earth? Why that family and town? Why teacher instead of soldier or politician? Why suffering instead of power, and death instead of conquering? *How* He came is a vast and incredible subject. Even if I were to preach for thirty-five or forty minutes *every day for a year*, we couldn't cover it all. Today I have time to mention just one of the dimensions of HOW HE CAME: Christmas came as a surprise. Jesus was the ultimate surprise package. We thought we were expectant, ready, eager, and waiting for Messiah to come for almost a thousand years. But He took us by surprise.

Shepherds did not expect angel choirs. Magi did not expect an impossible star. Herod did not expect the wise men to outwit or defy him, or he would have killed them, banished them, or had them followed. Mary did not expect a private audience with the Archangel Gabriel. Nobody thought it would be in a manger, in a stable. Joseph did not

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expect ... Well, it goes on and on. All the stories insist that it was a total surprise. Humans were not producing this drama. Nobody knew what in the world was going on. But nothing *earthly* was causing it, planning it, or making it happen.

Celebrations, by their very nature, are choreographed and planned. They honor the past. Only, this “past” refuses to stay in the past. Celebrations lock-in, solidify, define and, without meaning to, fossilize. Jesus is never content with “came.” *He comes!* We are celebrating dynamism. If we come anywhere close to celebrating the real Christmas, we are in for a big surprise. Do we think we can contain it with a calendar? It will happen at seven o’clock in the morning on the 25th? We are “ready” when the last item on the shopping list is crossed off? What incredible chutzpah to attempt to celebrate Christmas! At least we might remember that the parties and presents and decorations – and especially the worship (when we really are trying to be thoughtful and reverent) – at best only point toward what is far beyond us.

Christmas *always* comes as a surprise – it comes in unexpected ways. How does Jesus come this year? The only thing we know for sure is that it will be a surprise. Much as we have stylized our celebrations, and however many and beloved our traditions, Jesus always comes in a way we do not expect, from a place or direction where we are not looking. Time and familiarity and custom do not change it. It always catches us by surprise, off guard – extra and outside all our preparations. Its impact is always a shock, however pleasant or unpleasant the repercussions. If no such thing happens to us this year, then we sat it out, watched from afar – missed it, or refused to receive it.

So I have had my say, and told you what I was sent to tell you. The rest is just musing about it. But I like to do that. There is more than one Christmas carol; more than one story we tell; more than one candle we light; more than one present we give. Christmas has many facets and endless dimensions. Whether it annoys or delights us, we have four Gospels telling us about it, not just one. And of course I was talking about a much bigger surprise than just intellect or information, but I am constantly charmed by the stories themselves. I thought I knew the Christmas story pretty well by the time I was in seventh grade. Sometime toward the end of college, I started to realize that it was a lot bigger than I had thought. It has been surprising me, even on the intellect level, ever since. Lots of people think they know the story much

better than I do, so they are kind of bored with it. But that's because they think the Christmas story is just about the birth of a baby – a nine-month to year-long saga – back somewhere in the year 1 A.D. (a mistake we won't go into). If you know it's bigger than that, then you are not bored with it either. You are intrigued like I am. And we still get very excited about it.

Like, what do you think of the Christmas story in John's Gospel? Have you ever tried to do a crèche scene from his Gospel, instead of from Matthew and Luke? It is full of surprises. One surprise is connected with the probability that John wrote around twenty years after Matthew and Luke wrote their stories. In other words, it is very hard to imagine that John doesn't know the stories from Matthew and Luke, and yet he *chooses* to tell the story very differently. That is surprising to some people, even disturbing. They don't want to let him do that. It shakes things up, and threatens to make us think, go more open, expand our possibilities. Christmas is bigger than we realize and John knows it, and he hungers to let us in on it.

John's Gospel mentions Bethlehem once (7:42) but only to point out that people were troubled because Jesus had come from Galilee (Nazareth) and not from Bethlehem, where they thought Messiah was supposed to come from. They were surprised! It was a surprise that Messiah came from Nazareth. John writes *after* Matthew and Luke – presumably he has read and pondered the Gospels of both – but he chooses to tell it differently. Have you ever listened to the Gospel of John – heard the way John tells it?

From John 1:45-46: *“Philip went to find Nathanael and told him, ‘We have found the man of whom Moses wrote in the law, the man foretold by the prophets: it is Jesus son of Joseph, from Nazareth.’ ‘Nazareth!’ Nathanael exclaimed. ‘Can anything good come from Nazareth?’”* That's a joke, by the way – Nathanael and Philip are buddies; Nate is teasing him. (You're supposed to be laughing.) Only, Philip is not kidding this time. *“Philip said, ‘Come and see.’”* Does John give us any hint that Philip is mistaken? No. Philip is expressing John's view too. Have you ever listened to John's Gospel – let John tell the story his way? (John is the last, and many say the most profound, of all the Gospel writers.) Christmas is full of surprises, on many levels.

What about Christmas for us this year? Will we force it back into what we expect, so that everybody can stay comfortable, undisturbed,

and assured that all the miracles are in place and nothing very demanding or challenging or life-changing will happen? John never mentions a virgin. Do you think that means he doesn't believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God? Surely you jest! Did you hear this morning's Scripture reading?! John's Christmas is greater and more widespread and far-flung than any of the other writers have imagined. "*In the beginning ....*" Not nine months ago – *in the beginning!* This love and this salvation were in the mind of God since before the Creation – since before time began. Before anybody ever heard of a Jew or a Gentile or a Christian or a Muslim, God was imaging the children – ALL OF THEM – and loving them, knowing what this entrance into life and free will and individuality would portend. And God determined, in love and mercy, to track them through whatever was necessary to bring them to fullness of life – ALL OF THEM – to save them. Until ultimately, "*the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.*" THAT is what John thinks is Christmas. It is so vast it takes your breath away.

John doesn't put any trust in the virgin birth; John trusts the baptism – the descent of the Holy Spirit. In John's Gospel, Jesus says: "*That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the spirit is spirit.*" (3:6) In other words, the physical birth – Jesus' and ours – is not the relevant thing, much as we would like it to be if we are proud of our ancestors, or think there is something especially holy about virgins. Sorry, says Jesus in John's Gospel: "*You must be born anew ... born of the Spirit.*" (3:7) It is not about virgin birth – not for me, not for you, not for Jesus. It is about being born of the Spirit. "*But to all who did accept him, to those who put their trust in him, he gave the right to become children of God, born not of human stock, by the physical desire of a human father, but of God.*" (3:12-13) John doesn't like the virgin-birth stories that are starting to sweep through the early church. We want Jesus to be born of a virgin so He can be more nearly born of God, more obviously the Son of God. But John insists that if we are born of the Spirit, like Jesus was, we are all born of God. You cannot follow a Jesus born of a virgin – that Jesus is not like you are! But you *can* follow *this* Jesus. "*Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?*" (6:42) Have you ever listened to John's Gospel – ever let him tell the story his way?

Every year, there are people who accuse me of being no true Christian, or of trying to ruin Christmas, or of not loving Christmas, or of not really believing in Jesus. They are all mistaken. It most certainly

is true that I don't believe it the way some people think I'm supposed to. I hope you don't either! The love of God and the breadth of Christmas have been squeezed down to a tiny little glimmer of what John is talking about – no bigger than one culture, one church, one age, one nation, one world, or one group of people – whatever whoever is doing the talking happens to approve of. John says Jesus has come from a dimension beyond anything we can think of or imagine. *“Through him all things came to be; without him no created thing came into being.”* (1:3) And now WE are going to decide who this Being will ultimately love, on what basis some people will be saved, and the only right way for all of us to believe so we can “get” *ourselves* saved? I pray for the day when you will all love Christmas and believe in it as much as I do. Only, it is a lot bigger than I can say or comprehend – or what any other human on earth can say or comprehend. That is one of the most important things to know about it.

Therefore, it is full of surprises! Like you and I getting to be in on the newness, the differentness, and the continuing life-changes that Christmas endlessly brings. Like the fact that as followers, in small ways that we can never fully predict, the very pattern of Jesus' life becomes the pattern of our own lives: baptism; receiving the Holy Spirit; walking a new WAY with the Spirit in charge, where before we used to be in charge; finding our own ministry and service and suffering and defeat – and finding that these keep breaking forth into new victory and new possibilities ... until, through the whole series of deaths and resurrections we experience here on earth, we follow Him into the big one.

The Messiah was also a huge surprise because He wouldn't beat anybody up. He would not coerce anybody, force anybody, *make* anybody repent or believe. The expected Messiah was supposed to be the toughest military/political leader the world had ever seen. How else could he right all the wrongs and make a perfect world – bring “Peace On Earth”? Jesus was such a disappointing Santa Claus – oops, sorry (Freudian slip) – Jesus was such a disappointing Messiah that thousands of Christians are still waiting for the Second Coming, waiting for Jesus to come and do it again the way they think He should have done it in the first place: stop being a wimp and *make* everybody be good, or kill them off or roast them forever. All of Judaism still insists that Jesus could not have been the true Messiah because He did not do it right: He did not bring “Peace On Earth,” and He did not beat up all their enemies.

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But the real truth is that most of the world did not notice or care about any of it. Will we ever get used to that? Maybe one in every sixty people in Palestine at the time had any awareness of Jesus whatsoever [see the supplement at the end of this sermon]. Most people did not know or care – just like today. I’m talking about the full-spectrum Christmas: the Incarnation, the full life and ministry, the death and resurrection. But most people did not notice or care. It was business as usual. (“How silently, how silently ....”)

It is true that those who had glimmers – who felt the threat of His existence and tried to stop it – were unable to prevent it. They thought they had it stopped – at the birth, then in the middle, and then when they killed Him – but they were dealing with a power and an intelligence so far beyond them that they had no clue what they were up against. But they were a tiny handful. Most did not know or care.

Has it changed at all? Christmas still comes as a surprise. We do not produce it. We cannot stop it. Only a tiny handful notice or care. If you celebrate the true Christmas this year, you are in a small minority. Are you okay with that? Are you reconciled with that? One in sixty. If you think this is about going with the crowds, you will never get beyond “Christmas Past.”

Christmas comes as a great surprise. It so caught us off-guard that almost nobody lifted a finger to save the Messiah in His hour of greatest trial here. His very best friends – those who believed in Him most – all deserted. Or at least nobody died with Him. Nobody said, “Where are you going with our King?”

Later, when the shock wore off – when those who loved Him had time to recover a little, figure it out, and get past some of the dismay and confusion – they tried to make it up to Him. *Then* they began to die – with Him and for Him – by the thousands. It has been going on ever since. Yet it is still only a handful. Most do not notice or care. If you celebrate the true Christmas today, only a handful of those you know will celebrate with you, and understand, and go with you into the celebration that keeps transforming from past honor into present devotion – into the pilgrimage of those who love Him: the disciple bands of today. (Do you begin to understand why I don’t really care who or how many join this church? I am just very, very glad that *you* did.)

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When I was young, I thought we ought to pass a law that, upon pain of death, nobody could put up a Christmas tree or lights or any other Christmas decorations, or give or receive Christmas presents, unless they were a member in good standing in some Christian church – tithed to it, served in it faithfully – “seeking in grace and praise to discover God’s will for their own lives on a daily basis.”

But I did not understand our Messiah yet, did I? No coercion! It is not His WAY. He will not be our King until we *choose* Him. It’s like our covenants: Even as we write them, we become full members in this church. In the same moment that we choose Him, He becomes our King. Only the lucky ones stumble into it and find the truth within and behind all the glitter and noise. The chosen few. They rejoice in and beyond all words and anthems. And they go right on celebrating – trying to find appropriate ways to declare and spread the news – long after everybody else thinks it’s over.

### SUPPLEMENT

How many people are there in the New Testament story of Jesus? How many friends and followers did Jesus have at the height of His ministry? He fed five thousand. On Palm Sunday, there were enough supporters to neutralize the temple guard. What do you think – maybe ten or twelve thousand? (I'm trying to guess high.) Maybe half of all of Jesus' supporters showed up. So maybe twenty-five thousand people had heard about Jesus while He was on earth. (I mean all the way from Peter to somebody who just vaguely remembered having seen or heard Him.) It's probably half that, but I want to make sure you don't write me off as a pessimist.

How many enemies? I would guess maybe two or three hundred who were really concerned enough to want to put Him out of the picture. Let's do the same exaggerating and say five hundred. There was no telegraph, telephone, daily newspaper, radio, or television newsroom, so news could not travel like we assume it does today. If Jesus had twenty-five thousand supporters (from actual disciples to people who knew His name favorably) and five hundred enemies (from people sworn to kill Him to those who thought Him an inconvenience), then Jesus' movement was *enormous* in the Palestine of His day.

Are you picking up my point yet? How many people lived in the Jerusalem area in Jesus' day? Not the swollen crowds of Passover, just normal population? Seventy-five thousand? A hundred thousand? Three out of every four people in Jerusalem had never even heard of Jesus. (More likely nine out of ten.) And that's the hub – where things are known. And that's if we swell the figures as much as possible. I estimate, at the best scenario, that one in every sixty people in Palestine had even a slight awareness that Jesus existed (over twenty-five thousand knew Him; population of maybe one and a half million). Silly figures, I know – we cannot be sure. But the point I'm trying to make was real then, and it still is today.

Does the majority rule, even if it only sometimes votes? How do most people approach Advent? It is the same today as it always has been: The vast majority do not approach Advent at all. They don't have a clue. If they have heard about it at all, they don't really care one way or the other. There are bills to pay, games to watch, and trials everywhere. A lot of farmers were watching the weather; a lot of Roman soldiers were

wondering where they would be assigned next; a lot of religious people were studying Scripture, sending their kids to school, and trying to keep their synagogues prosperous and healthy. The whole thing with Jesus came and went and they didn't know or care one way or the other. (Jesus wept over Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, you remember, because "*they did not know the time of their visitation.*") Does that make you shudder? It does if you have a shudder in you.

How many people today pick up the paper or listen to the news each morning but don't care about Jesus one way or the other? He is still here; the invitation is still being made – it is still open. Yet they really don't care one way or the other. If He was the Son of God, fine! Pass the toast. If this is the time of our visitation, fine! I'm going to be home late tonight – I've got a meeting of the meeting people.

The vast majority of people have responded to Advent in the same way down through the ages. If they have heard the words at all, nothing has registered. If they know, they do not care. They are too bored or too busy to really care about God. They believe in God, of course, but they do not *care* about God. Some people have a serious but very different approach to God (Hindu, Buddhist, etc.), but that's a different category altogether.

I am not saying that any of you are in this group. But some of you can look in the mirror and see people who used to be. I am not telling you to go do something about it either, unless you end up believing you are called to that. I'm just saying that if you want to understand Advent, you have to know this. We all need to know and remember it. Remembering that most of the world does not care is an important perspective to our own approaches to Advent. Otherwise we start making a lot of false assumptions and getting a lot of wrong expectations. If you awaken to the Savior's coming and hear the invitation and respond this Advent, you may hear the bells, but most of the folk around you will not. They will not rejoice with you, nor will they understand or cheer. It is important to know that. Christmas is not run by majority rule. Not the real Christmas.