

WHY HE CAME

Christmas is many things. It is many different things to different people. But for Christians, it is first and foremost the Incarnation: the coming of God in human form to bless us and get close to us – if we will allow it – in ways clearer and more powerful than ever before. The Incarnation is never just the birth. It is the full-spectrum story. We have been musing about this and some of its implications on our way through Advent. But we have not asked WHY HE CAME. We have been celebrating Christmas, but we are never finished with the mystery and the wonder of what we are really celebrating. It is both simple and profound: I think He comes because we need Him.

A funny thing, but lots of people don't like to bring real life into nice places like Christmas – they don't like to bring all the gore and cruelty and senseless evil and unimaginable stupidity that stab their way into every day, every newspaper page, and every suffering life that we encounter. But if things were really “nice” in this world, Christmas would never have happened. If this were a happy, healthy planet, God would never have interrupted the life of the Son to send Him here – God would not have needed to interrupt our lives by sending Him here. And Christmas is a huge interruption, as you know, for everybody who pays any attention. The great joy we now sing about and celebrate is ultimately and inevitably the proof of our truly desperate situation.

If you learned that a terrible plague was coming and that it threatened the life of every man, woman, and child on earth, you would think that a desperate situation. Well, the plague is called “sin” – alienation from God – and it guarantees the death of every man, woman, and child on earth. It is a desperate situation. He came because we need Him! And I do not mean just to fix the faucet or give us a few simple slogans, or to tell us to buck-up, light just one little candle, or be nice to each other. It has gone way beyond that. The world and everybody in it is in deeper trouble than that. It is not going to be fixed that easily or we would have seen to it ourselves, long before this. But the real Christmas is so powerful that it is not afraid of life or death. If we stop trying to protect it, and stop trying to hide it away in a fantasy world, it comes to redeem us in our real situations.

WHY HE CAME

Things are dying all around us, including people – dying in all kinds of ways, dying to all kinds of life: marriages are dying; friendships are dying; businesses, schools, churches, forests, cultures, and nations are dying. And they get sick and suffer a lot on the way to dying. Often we don't really know why. Often the very ones we need the most are dying. It's not just "bad" marriages, friendships, businesses, churches, forests, cultures, and people that are dying. To be sure, new things are also coming to life; I did not say there was no light or joy or love at all. We just have to stop pretending that there is no shadow, and stop pretending that we can get to the light all by ourselves, whenever we want to. And we have to stop pretending that we can heal things whenever we decide to.

Of course, I understand why we want to keep Christmas out of real life and turn it into a fantasy celebration. What if we try to believe it and it turns out to be as false as all our other favorite stories? Like the ones about Santa Claus, and the Tooth Fairy, and the Fairy Godmother; and the one about if you work hard and stay responsible, you will be successful; and the one about if you are good and do good things, everybody will love you. We have already had about all of that we can stand. But our fear separates Christmas from its true purpose. That means we miss the only HOPE there is for real LIFE – in the real situations – where the struggle between life and death is actually going on. He came because we need Him. Seeing and admitting our need is the only way we will ever get past Santa Claus to Jesus Christ – past all the surface glitter to the offer of a very new and different WAY of Life, one that does not end in death.

Christmas is full of a very deep gratitude for a life-changing hope and a purpose-changing presence. We don't start out on a bed of roses, or that gratitude could not be the truth. Today I want to ask and urge you – I cannot demand, but I ask and urge you – to bring your joy and gratitude to its apex by thinking *on purpose* about WHY He came. What is the impact – the purpose – of His coming? To put it more in the framework of Christmas celebrations: We take time to be thoughtful, send cards, write Christmas letters, buy gifts for many people we like and care about. Might we also go to Jesus and tell Him personally, *in our own words*, why we are grateful to Him – what we know and recognize about what He has done for us? Of all the things we have done for and about Christmas this year, I suspect this is still the most important of all.

Truly I cannot do such a thing for you, but perhaps I can help get the process started. I want to remind you of the three major categories, or images, concerning the WHY of Jesus' coming. Then it's up to you to search for your own best expression and gratitude.

WHY DID JESUS COME? WHAT DOES JESUS REALLY DO FOR US?

This is not going to be three long and erudite explanations. It will be an oversimplification, a cursory introduction. I still hope you are willing to listen really fast.

I.) RANSOM is the first image or category. The earliest thought-frames of the Christian church put and answered this question in terms of what Jesus did to Satan, to Hell, and to death. The early Christians had a personal, one-on-one relationship with all three. Satan, Hell, and death were the enemies. Early Christians often personified them, and they took all three with extreme seriousness. From this first category, we get many words and concepts, but the big one is RANSOM. In the thought-frames of this perspective, we are captive to Satan, held in bondage, crushed under the weight of sin, fear, loneliness, and death. There is no escape by human power. Jesus comes to defeat Satan, to win us away from death and Hell. Jesus goes to the Cross and death so that Satan will take Him into Satan's own realms. Unable to resist such a prize – thinking he can destroy the mission and ministry of Jesus – Satan helps to engineer the crucifixion. Claiming victory, he takes Jesus to death and Hell. Only, it doesn't work out like Satan thought. The powers of Hell are not strong enough to hold Jesus captive. In a blaze of light and power, Jesus bursts all the bonds of death and Hell that try to hold Him. We sometimes hear the ancient phrase: "He descended into Hell." And what the early Christians thought Jesus was doing in Hell was dancing down the halls, ripping all the doors off their hinges, breaking all the shackles, disintegrating all the chains – and setting everybody free! That was their theme. Jesus died in our place, as an undercover agent, in order to RANSOM us from sin (Hell), death, and the Devil. It didn't matter if you had gone to Hell – Jesus wouldn't leave you there. *Jesus did not like Hell, and He meant business!* Not like the namby-pamby Jesus of today, who keeps a few people out of Hell but leaves the place operating at full-bore for everybody else. The early Christians thought Jesus was cleaning the place out, putting it out of business for good. This was before Christianity became a religion for women and children – before the church needed the threat of Hell and Satan to control people

and try to *make* them be good. Early on, there was a lot of Pecos Pete and Paul Bunyan in our Savior. RANSOM! That was WHY Jesus came: to set everybody free – here, now, and everywhere. Not some little, “Well, not unless you are a Christian and belong to our church, and accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, and say ‘pretty please’ like we tell you to.” Peter and Paul and two generations of Christians would have laughed in your face. You think they converted a pagan empire by acting like some private theological club? *Jesus* was Savior – not the theologians, not the church, and not some humanly contrived little formula. Of course, it’s true that they did not mean freedom to do your own thing, like we usually do. They meant freedom from Satan’s bondage so that we could serve God in a realm of truth and light and love forever.

Anyway, that is the first category. With a little translation and meditation, I love it, claim it, and rejoice in it. I *know* about captivity to sin and Satan. It doesn’t take me very long to comprehend that Jesus’ coming is about freedom from bondage to death, Hell, and Satan. But it is a translation. It is not my native language. I had to learn it before I could realize how profoundly it applied to my own life. Now I ask you: Is there any language or imagery from this first category that you use when you celebrate Christmas? When you come to Jesus to thank Him for why He came and what He does for you, is there any trace of an old concept called RANSOM?

II.) The second category focuses on God and Heaven rather than on Hell and Satan. It has been right there all along, but after the first hundred years and through most of church history since, most of the language and imagery come from a second image and category: ATONEMENT. Humans break the covenant. Humans break God’s laws and precepts. Humans, by their rebellion and desertion and defiance, deserve death. They end up so far into the minus side of the ledgers of Life that somebody has to pay *for* them what they cannot pay for themselves, or they are goners – in debt forever, too deep to ever get out. This second category has been around too long – been used and explained in too many ways by too many people – to be neat and tidy. It has many expressions, comes from many angles, and uses lots of words: expiation, redemption, sacrifice (“*The lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world*”). But over all, cutting to the core, it sees salvation as a problem of RIGHTEOUSNESS. Heaven is a realm of justice, peace, and love. God is a God of justice, peace, and love. (Who would want it otherwise?) The issue is that we do not match – we do not fit with God’s ways and plans – not the way we

are here. If God let us in the way we are, it would destroy Heaven. If we bicker, quarrel, pout, rebel, preen our egos, nurse our anger, try to out-do each other in Heaven like we do here, what would happen? Instead of Heaven on earth, we let earth into Heaven. Pretty soon, it would be just as bad there as it is here.

With many variations of emphasis, the second category pictures us as unfit for Heaven or eternal life – we are unqualified and disqualified. Jesus takes on our detriment: pays our debts; pays with His righteous worth for our hopeless debt or sin (most poignantly depicted in images of the crucifixion mixed with the meanings of the altar sacrifice). ATONEMENT is a moral/spiritual transaction wherein Jesus pays with His life to prevent our destruction, and to give us another chance at relationship with God. Jesus stands surety for us – He guarantees that our forgiveness will result in newness of life. All ATONEMENT concepts assume that we will change enough – get holy enough from now on – to prove that Jesus’ sacrifice was worth it, that His faith in us was well-founded. In the more advanced concepts of this category, Jesus stays with us, once we have accepted His mercy, and works with us toward our sanctification, now that we have been saved from destruction. Of course, God is not content to lose Jesus, so He is resurrected back into Life. Nevertheless, ATONEMENT constructs always reek of a righteous judgment. Grace is partial, and salvation still depends on us finally getting it right. Most of Christendom has never accepted Jesus as full Savior. Their belief is that He only delays the judgment; He buys you some time, but you are still under LAW – you still have to clean up your act, or Hell is waiting for you.

Quite obviously, I am heretic to most of Christendom. Oh, I’m far from alone, and I am not the author or designer of any of what I try to teach you. But with many Christian brothers and sisters down through the ages, I claim that unless you trust Jesus totally – accept the fullness of His total grace and love – you cannot feel His presence or His Kingdom enough to know real freedom and redemption, or to catch a glimmer of your own true identity. I believe He will go on working to save you anyway, but you will not know it or feel its true power yet.

Note that in the first category, the action is between Jesus and Satan. In the second category, the action is between Jesus and God. In the first scenario, Satan wants to keep us, and Jesus will not let him. In the second scenario, God cannot afford our presence, and Jesus

offers a price God cannot refuse, in order to give us another chance. In both cases, Jesus is the active agent of a major change. Jesus makes all the difference. There is a great deal of *mythical* content in the first category, and a great deal of *mystical* content in the second category. That is, Jesus is doing things and making arrangements and fighting for us on levels far beyond this earth, and far beyond our capacity to fully understand. But people of the first or second category, when they say “Thank you, Jesus,” they are not kidding! When they celebrate His coming, it is not just a sideshow – it is the whole ballgame, and everything depends upon it. I am asking: When *you* go to thank Jesus for coming, what are you thanking Him for? Why do you think He came? What does He do for *you*? Some of you may be comfortable with one of these constructs. In theology, RANSOM is called “The Classic View,” and ATONEMENT is called “The Latin View.” But I suspect most of you need to get past some of the images of the old formulas or it doesn’t get personally real. You need to talk to Jesus in your own words. I know I need to.

Personally, I don’t speak the language of the second category very easily. You have picked that up, I suspect. I had to learn the language in order to understand many of my Christian friends from the past, but it is not native or natural to me. I have great regard for some of the images and concepts when I rework and reapply them. But I have never been able to accept the construct that Jesus and God are adversaries over our salvation – that Jesus is appeasing God, or paying God off with His life to buy us a new chance. I am actually very sad that this is what most of Christendom believes. It seems clear to me that we need more than one new chance, but this view of ATONEMENT leaves us very quickly with the same old picture of a wrathful God, and the same old grim efforts to win salvation by our own efforts to get righteous. ATONEMENT can be better than it is usually pictured, but for millions of Christians, Jesus is a temporary reprieve – nothing has really changed, and GOD’S GRACE AND LOVE are quickly muted. It’s the same old wrath and the same old rules, and in this construct, only a handful of outstanding spiritual athletes ever get any real benefit from Jesus’ coming.

I flat-out reject the doctrine that God needed or wanted Jesus to die to appease God’s own wrath or to placate his righteousness. I do not believe that Jesus’ coming was preordained by God to end in crucifixion, or that Judas had no choice but to betray Jesus, or that Jesus had no choice but to stay in Jerusalem and die. That is not what the blood or the

Cross or His coming means to me. If I had to believe that to be a Christian, I would *not* be a Christian. But since this is the familiar language and doctrine of the vast majority of Christendom, I wonder what language you yourself use to thank Jesus, to celebrate Christmas, to think or talk about WHY He came.

III.) The third image or category focuses on RECONCILIATION. It cares about what Jesus does *on earth*. Now the spotlight has swung away from Satan and Hell and away from God and Heaven, and it focuses on what Jesus did and does for human beings like you and me, here in this world. There is still mystery, still more power and love than we can comprehend. God and Satan and Hell and eternal LIFE are still in the picture. But Christmas is not about beating up Satan *or* appeasing God. It is about a gift God gives to us: The Presence ... *Immanuel* ... God with us.

In the third category, Jesus is not killed because of Satan. He is not killed because of God. His death is not contrived by outside forces. WE kill Him. We finally admit it. He is not paying some mythical or mystical price in some off-worldly market. He dies because *humans* cannot stand Him. He dies because human institutions of law and justice cannot tolerate Him. Our world is not ready for and cannot handle His goodness, and so WE reject Him. In the third construct, Jesus is not tricking Satan or appeasing God. Jesus is dealing with *us*. We are the ones with the problem – an anger and a rebellion toward God (and all authority) so fierce that we cannot love God or Jesus or ourselves or each other, not very deeply or consistently or for very long. We want control, we want to run things our own way, we want to be God – that is the real anatomy of “The Fall.” In killing Jesus, we discover in blazing clarity what we have always most wanted to deny: the true extent and condition of our alienation from our Creator – and the resulting terror (however much we try to mute it), the resulting anger (however much we try to justify it), and the resulting idolatry of all the ways we try to fill our empty lives with *external things* and *internal excuses*.

Jesus does not come to reconcile God. He comes to reconcile us! The blood – His Life – is given: first, so we can see ourselves as we really are; second, to win us over – to show us that we are mistaken about the mind and the motives we have attributed to God. That is the greatest of all projections: we read into God the motives and fears and hatreds we have inside ourselves. The Cross (and there is no Christmas without the Cross) is the emblem of God’s Message and Messenger – God’s heart –

WHY HE CAME

pushed to the wall. So finally we see what the true content and purpose and motive of the Message and its Source really are – what God’s attitude toward us really is. Is it anger or disgust? Vengeance or retaliation? Judgment or punishment or wrath? If ever in all the universes it would be any of those things, surely they would come front and center at the crucifixion of the Son. BUT THEY DO NOT! That is not God’s heart or mind toward us, though we have always secretly thought so.

For those who notice – for those who “hear it” – something twists so deep inside that the self can never recover. We were in error. With all our assumptions – all our fear and anger toward the Almighty – we have been *mistaken* about God. Forgiveness and love – where we least deserve it and least expect it – change our hearts. RECONCILIATION. The tears come. The veil drops. The anger dies. The terrible warfare between us and God melts away. “Abba – Daddy – is it really YOU? Thank God! I can breathe again and dance again – risk and fail and laugh and love again. All is well, despite all our surroundings. Hope and Life and Light are real! Wow, Jesus, you finally got through to me! Abba, I have been wasting so much time and life. I have been so angry and afraid.”

RECONCILIATION. The “Waiting Father” has been worried about us and waiting for us all along. And the Resurrection not only shows us who Jesus really is, it is God’s quietest way of saying: “In case you are confused or forgetful, it was not for lack of power that I did not strike back. It was not from helplessness that I absorbed all your scorn and hurt and punishment. I know you are lost, frightened, angry. I know you think I’m mean because your life is hard. I cannot explain it all to you yet, but I am trying to let you know that I truly love you – and I am reminding you forever that your realm is only a brief and tiny part of the full story.”

Three categories – frameworks for thinking about WHY HE CAME. I have only hinted at them in the hope that you might use them, and go beyond them. You want Christmas to get real, sink in, and stay with you this time? I think we each need to go to Jesus and tell Him personally, *in our own words*, why we are grateful to Him – what we know and recognize about why He has come and what He has done for us. You have said and done and sent to everybody else you care about. Shouldn’t He be on the list too?

* * *

WHY HE CAME

P.S. Some of you do not respond well to mental constructs. That's okay. Here is a scene or image you can use instead. It comes from Matthew. *"And when Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.'"* (Matthew 3:16-17 (Mark 1:10-11; Luke 3:22-23)) Other translations read: *"This is my beloved Son in whom I take delight."* Or, *"You are my beloved Son, on you my favor rests."*

Perhaps you have pondered this passage many times and heard it in terms of Jesus. But have you heard it through Jesus for you, yourself? That's why He came, you know – to bring you with Him, to draw you into Life with Him. This is the true Christmas: He came so you could hear it, feel it, and experience it too. Baptism, after all, is following Him onto the Christian Path and WAY.

You do not need water. *"John answered them all, 'I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.'"* (Luke 3:16) Go into the wilderness and do not come out until you hear the voice descending on *you*, saying, "You are my beloved daughter ... you are my beloved son ... in you I take delight ... on you my favor rests." *That is the true Christmas! Immanuel – God with us! "You are my beloved, on you my favor rests."* Without that moment, and that incredible reassurance, is there any chance at all that we can walk the WAY that Jesus calls us into?