

BASKING IN THE GLORY

Many of us have awakened to reality because of stories that have moved us and gotten into us. I loved my father, and still do, but he had a hard life, and he pulled us out of poverty and slums by faith in God mixed with severe personal discipline. It left the marks of a rigid work ethic that never left him, and so he had no time for stories. He thought reading fiction was a waste of time. Made-up stories that never really happened were for other people who had time on their hands and could afford to squander it. One time I asked him what he thought of the story of the Prodigal Son. He smiled, but he never answered me.

My mother loved stories – read them, told them, made them up. Opposites attract, if I have failed to mention that before. A bit of wisdom bequeathed to us from astrology. Astrology itself is an interesting mixture of fact and fantasy. But then, so is history, economics, political science, and even physics.

Many of you have loved the writings of C.S. Lewis. Did you learn more from *Mere Christianity*, or from *That Hideous Strength*? A silly question; both are wonderful. But C.S. Lewis was a strange mixture of serious scholarship and wonderful fantasy. Many people believe in Satan because, instead of arguing theologically, C.S. Lewis described the way Satan thinks and works. The shock of recognition, especially in *The Screwtape Letters*, was more compelling than well-framed arguments.

There are loads of trashy novels, and reading them is a waste of time and life. Even though I mean that, I suppose it's my father speaking. But there are great and wondrous stories that reveal and remind us what life is really about and what's going on here. If I go too long without reading great fiction or fantasy, I get so dull that I start forgetting why any of it matters. I have gotten so dull, a couple of times in my life, that I even started reading newspapers. If you ever go to the library, get a newspaper from today, from ten years ago, and from twenty years ago and lay them side by side. If you change the names and dates, you realize that most of it is the same old stuff. Nothing has changed very much on the surface of life. Yet I have friends who pore over the newspapers every day, thinking that if they keep up with the news, they will comprehend the trends and be able to make better decisions by discerning what's going to happen in the future. And they think astrology is soothsaying?!

Some of you have been reading interesting articles in *TIME* or *Newsweek* that mostly corroborate things about the birth narratives of Jesus that we have been teaching around here for many years, and for many years before I came here. My father and mother learned much of it before I was born. The information is nothing new; it's merely unmentioned in most churches. And it is information available to anyone who doesn't refuse to look at the evidence. "There are none so blind as those that will not see." (Jonathan Swift) "They never will hear, but turn a deaf ear." (Also Jonathan Swift) In any case, the first two chapters of Matthew and the first two chapters of Luke are clearly contrived – made up, added on later. The internal biblical evidence is overwhelming. It was not chicanery; it was honest men trying to provide information that nobody had, and seeking it in Old Testament prophecy. With the leads they took from Old Testament prophecy, they told very thoughtful stories. The problem – the reason I will not stay silent about it – is that some of our worst theology has come from these stories: Jesus was not human; sex is tainted, if not downright evil; Mary, and even her mother, is as necessary to our salvation as Jesus is; we are saved by a physical miracle rather than by spiritual rebirth. The baptism is obscured. Following Jesus is minimized. Christmas was banned by the Protestant Reformers and forbidden by the Puritans for some very good reasons. We know why Macy's wanted to bring it back, but if *you* are going to bring it back and keep it as a major and central holy day – a central celebration and time of worship in your life and in the life of your family – you better know and remember what you are doing and why. Otherwise there will not be anything left of the true Christmas.

Among many, many wondrous stories, I like *Harry Potter*. It is instructive as well as amazing that the reaction of the more conservative wing of the Christian church is that the *Harry Potter* series is evil, while the *Left Behind* series is considered wonderful. And yet, in my humble opinion, *Harry Potter* is filled with great insights, faith, and moral teachings, while the *Left Behind* books are pure, unadulterated Christian trash. My sister, deep in the grief of the recent loss of her husband, was enthralled by *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. Sometimes grief, or any kind of trauma, makes us more open to meaning than we would normally be. For instance, there are Dementors in the story – the guards of Azkaban. They draw the joy out of you; if nothing stops them, you will be left with nothing but the worst experiences of your life, without any good feeling or any happy memories – nothing worth living for, nothing worth striving for. In the end, if you receive the Dementor's kiss, you are left as soulless and evil as the Dementors are themselves. Then you get

to do unto others what you have allowed to be done unto you. Does it take some kind of genius to realize that J.K. Rowling is putting into story form the realities of “depression,” the only disease of our time more prevalent and more devastating than cancer?

Harry saves himself and his friend from the Dementors because he has learned a great spell: *Expecto patronum!* Only, you cannot just say it. Even the wand will not make it work unless you actually mean it from deep in your soul, and say it while focused on faith, joy, and believing you are loved. (See John Granger’s *Looking for God in Harry Potter*, pages 139-145.) Of course, the spell works on many levels, all the way from Harry remembering the love of his parents, to total trust in the authority of Christ. *Expecto* – from the Apostle’s Creed – means “I long for my Savior and deliverer.” *Patronum* means authority, father, guardian. Harry’s *patronus* comes in the shape of a stag or unicorn – both traditional symbols of Christ. For Harry, it starts with remembering his father, then escalates from there. And I repeat: this must be said – uttered – in joy and faith that cannot be pretended. Even his teacher (Lupin) is dumbfounded by the power of Harry’s spell, for he himself cannot say it with the faith and joy that Harry uses to utter it. No true depression will run from a feeble attempt at positive thinking, or from trying to pretend an earthly optimism. But indeed it will run from the power of Christ’s light and love and resurrection.

So the story did not teach my sister anything she didn’t already know. But it reminded her. It made it clear again what was really happening in her life. And when the dark moods try to come and suck her life away, she smiles and cries: *Expecto patronum!* That is how we are supposed to hear and use fantasy. That is what stories are really for. Not an escape from life, but a *reminder* of what is really going on – what is at stake – and how we may respond. And without the stories, we often forget, get confused, or lose track of the real plot.

Do you say it too? “In joy I long for and await my Father’s coming.” No Dementor can stand in the face of *that!* Yet longing for it is not enough. “Await” is the key. (And yes, subtly but powerfully the story makes clear that while it starts with Harry remembering the earthly father he never knew, but knew loved him, it moves quickly beyond that to the True Father.)

The big drama of Christmas is that Jesus was born – He whom God chose as his special vessel; Messiah, yet with His own full choice (free will); Spirit-filled, obedient, and divine Son of God; revealer of God, and reconciler to God; beyond anything our world has ever imagined; beyond anything we have ever seen before or since – Jesus our Savior came to be with us, to live among us, to die at our hands, to rise again that we would know where true authority really comes from. And many of us have realized that apart from His presence and love, we *do* fear and serve Satan, whether or not we ever mean to. Ah yes, the stakes are higher than we like to admit. Higher than we want to know – at first. And while the evidence has always been all around us and all throughout history, it gets clearer and clearer the longer we live here.

That is the big drama: the Incarnation – God with us.

Now, I believe people have a right to expect honesty and candor from their pastors. What a concept! Here, where you are free and responsible for your own faith, the benefit of our freedom is that we can be honest with each other and share our real faith, and even help each other to keep growing in our trust and understanding. Whatever our theological constructs, what really matters is how much we trust Jesus – and because of Jesus, how much we trust God. Only, in our time it is not enough to merely say “Trust God” and mean it in some generic sense. We trust God, each of us individually, for personal caring, for destiny, for direction, for Life. Otherwise it is mere theory without content or effect.

So I will be as clear as I can be (not necessarily right, but clear). If you were paying attention, you heard the words that lift Jesus beyond all other human beings and truly claim Him as Savior and Lord. Most of you know that I really mean them. That doesn't matter, in the final analysis, except to me; to me it means everything. But you also heard the hint of what many would call “heresy,” only it's a heresy better than orthodoxy: Jesus is not the same as God. Jesus of Nazareth is still an earth being, and you cannot pour the fullness of the Almighty, Omnipotent, Eternal God into the tiny if wondrous frame of a physical human being. (Some of it, yes, but not the fullness.) Jesus is more than Jesus of Nazareth. And all of *you* are more than you know too, as Jesus kept teaching and insisting. But Arius was correct and Athanasius was wrong – even though Athanasius ended up winning the creedal battle, after many years of debate and the thing going back and forth. When it takes sixty years for the best minds of Christendom to debate a matter and they never truly agree because the arguments are both close and

subtle, then only history and fear of the topic itself can pretend that we really figured it out or got it right. Jesus is not God, but the Son of God. Jesus did not come to reveal Himself, but to reveal God. Jesus did not come to reconcile us to Himself, but to reconcile us to God. Jesus, I believe, would be horrified by the ways we forget His own teachings and purposes. Always He pointed us to the Father, even though it was to a God we had never really understood or trusted.

Actually, I am not as heretical as some would suppose. All too frequently, there is a failure to distinguish between here and eternity. I know Jesus' identity is not the same in the higher realms as it was here on earth. Do you think yours will be? If in John's Gospel Jesus says, "*I and the Father are one,*" is that one in truth and purpose, or one in substance – that is, is it intentionality, or identity? And in John's Gospel, Jesus also prays, "*That they may all be one.*" (John 14:20) Him in God, us in Him – one big happy family. Then the Trinity is Father, Son, Holy Spirit ... and the Body (the church, the *ecclesia*). The church is the bride of Christ, and the two shall become one. If I'm not over your heads, I sure as Heaven am over mine! Meanwhile, who still remembers that Jesus of Nazareth came to earth and was human here?

"When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to every one." (I Corinthians 15:28) Does Jesus pray to Himself, or to God? Does Jesus obey Himself, or God? Does Jesus worship Himself, or God? Do we even remember the Lord's Prayer? So the theory is: When Jesus gets to Heaven, He turns back into God. Who decided that? Who was there to see it, that it is claimed with such certainty? Creeds are for clarity, and to stop arguments. But they are also for those who are afraid we will not believe enough unless the claim is closed and our minds are shut off to question or comprehension. Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and even much Protestantism in our time are afraid Jesus will not be great enough – that He will not have the power to save us (even with God's help) – unless we turn Jesus into God himself.

So you might want to tell me that I don't really believe in the Trinity, but you would be mistaken. Three-in-one can be ONE in purpose, mind, and heart. "God in three persons" can be God in three manifestations. And is God not manifested – revealed – in endless ways? Who decided that we have to define it all as if we understood all mystery and all knowledge, and that anybody who dared to question or think about it

was damned? Was it Jesus who taught us to be this way? Not ever! That is, Jesus did not live, teach, or act this way Himself. It was *after the creeds* that we decided it was more important to write doctrines about Jesus than it was to follow Him. But if He is not divine and perfect, then why should we follow Him? I don't know about you, but I follow Him and believe in Him because of His life and death and resurrection – because of the WAY He lived. The more we pay attention to His life among us, it gets ever clearer that God really sent Him, really lived in Him, really revealed himself in and through Him. But in that case, it becomes more and more important to live in our own obedience to His Holy Spirit – to dedicate and devote our entire lives to Him, not merely to sing pretty carols once a year and honor His memory with accolades that sound good but have little to do with how we live or choose or manage our own lives.

“He who begins by loving Christianity better than Truth will proceed by loving his own sect or church better than Christianity, and end by loving himself better than all.” I should have said that, but I did not. Samuel Taylor Coleridge said it, over two hundred years ago. (*Aids to Reflection – Moral and Religious Aphorisms XXV.*)

So here in Luke is a story about a mother. And the part I know is true is that Mary pondered things in her heart. Despite my failure to revere virginity above maternity, I do know that Jesus had a mother. If we could ever get past the virgin thing, it would be fun to start thinking about and remembering that Jesus really did have a mother who cared for Him, loved Him, worried about Him, and had a huge influence on His growth and development. And every mother worthy of the title wonders, ponders, prays, and dreams about what her child will be like – what they will turn into, achieve, become. And the story about Simeon rings true as well. There are always those in the wings who seem to have special insight into the nature and destiny of every child who is loved and cared about. There is always an uncle, a grandparent, a godfather, a friend, or a relative somewhere who realizes that this child is special. The story rings true because we all identify. Each life is a miracle, and though often we forget, we ought not to forget.

In any case, I want to urge you this morning to bask in the glory of Christmas – the glory of the Incarnation – the coming of the strangest and most wonderful person who ever walked this earth. And you cannot do that unless you get past, or loose from, all the creeds and formulas that separate us from really caring about Jesus, from what He is really

like, and from how much He really loves us, human to human. And as long as we keep turning Him into God before we even get to know Him, we will never really love Him back – not enough to really follow Him into the New Life He reveals and invites us into. And that is because, though His WAY is beautiful and wondrous, it is also rigorous and so very different from anything our world believes or understands.

I suspect we are not back to normal yet; we have not recovered from Christmas yet. And I hope you will not rush out of the magic this year and back into normal life. It is a season to ponder, to wonder, to drink it all in. It is a season to consider what *He* did more than what *we* are going to do, at least for a little while. We are still with the magic of Incarnation, if we are open to it, if we are willing to claim it, if we are willing to let it into our own lives. It is important not to be in a rush. There has already been so much rush. Let the rush be over. Take walks alone. Turn off all the noisemakers around you. Turn off the cell phones, the television, the ball games. Cancel some of the obligations and appointments that can wait until next week. Take time just to be with Jesus – to ponder His coming, what He was really like, how much He really cared. Even to ponder how different He was, and how differently He lived, from the normal values, motives, and purposes of our normal world. If our faith is real – if our faith is true at all – Jesus is still available, still here as Holy Spirit, still eager and willing to make Himself known to you ... you yourself. But not if you are in such a hurry and such a rush that you cannot hear or notice. If the Holy Spirit shouted above the din and haste, it would break our free will – it would no longer be from choice or our own desire for this relationship; it could no longer be a love-bond. So He waits ... until we want it too – the connection, the friendship between us. Bask in the Glory of Christmas. Wait for Him, as He waits for you ... until you feel and hear the dialogue that forms deep within, in the quiet and true caring of your soul. “How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given.”

Christmas is love far beyond anything we have ever seen or known before. All the lesser miracles pale to insignificance in the light of who He really is, how much He really cares, and what He really asks of us and makes possible for us. Bask in it. Drink it in. Let it fill you.