

## TOO MUCH HERO

The little interlude between Christmas and New Year's always seems like a special gift. We may do some work, but in our heads we have not gone back to work. Decorations are still everywhere, but the busy preparations are over. It is a chance to think about it all, to let it sink in, to see how much was mood and how much is really ours to keep. I hope we decide to keep it all, though that remains to be seen.

Who is the baby whose birth we celebrated – whose coming has changed the world forever? The wise men (the magi), who are trained enough in strange arts to come and visit, are also wise enough to have run for their lives. The story puts it in a dignified way, perhaps, but that is the situation. Herod, if he can catch them, will interrogate and force them to lead him to the baby. His agents are everywhere. The little family flees into Egypt. If we believe the meaning of the stories, we cannot escape it, can we? What seemed so wonderful, so beautiful and appealing – what the whole world seemed to be welcoming and praising – now goes underground, into hiding, because it is in mortal danger. Soon only a tiny handful will remember, and they will nurture and carry the dream quietly, honoring it where and when they can – always watchful for His presence, but aware also that the world does not truly love or follow Him. They eagerly find and try to support each other, and they long always for a time when everyone will love and accept Him, His Message, and His WAY. But it will not be here – in this world, in this lifetime – outside the pockets of believers who are scattered here and there. Disciples know this and refuse to be discouraged; they refuse to be suckered into making false claims or diluting the WAY. They can live for Him, but the world is not His friend, at least not for very long – not when the issues and problems arise. The world goes after false gods. Short of that, it blames the true God. That is the world's way.

One nice thing about Santa Claus is that he discreetly disappears when the party is over. He doesn't try to horn in on our lives week after week, month after month. It's back to the North Pole for Santa. Jesus, on the other hand, does not deal with parties that have endings. He always wants to play for keeps. And while He does not intrude without our permission, we can tell that He is always waiting, hoping, eager to go play LIFE together – any time and all the time.

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After all the really nice things our world has said and sung about Jesus in the last few weeks, you would think that just about everybody everywhere would be very willing and eager to be with Him, even more anxious and eager about it than He is. But since that never proves to be the case in reality, folk like us have to develop some sort of patience and understanding for why the world talks one way around Christmas time yet acts so very different the rest of the year. Why do we have so much trouble with Jesus? Why would we like it much better if, like Santa, Jesus would discreetly disappear now, until sometime next December?

Of course, there are lots of reasons. One of them is that Jesus' friends often talk about Him in ways that are either very embarrassing or really quite stupid. We try to remember that Jesus is who He is regardless of some of His friends, but it makes it hard. And sometimes we end up saying almost nothing ourselves, for fear we will put other people off. That makes it hard too.

There are also many tougher reasons. We only have time for one today: Jesus is too much hero. That's right. He makes us jealous, at least until after we really come to love Him. We have a hard time with the comparison between His life and ours. Most folk solve the problem by never paying much attention to the real story. Others like to pretend that the followers exaggerated and deified Jesus. That's another way to keep from taking the story seriously. But the truth is, Jesus is too much hero. That really bothers us. It's like we all finally learned to run the three-minute mile, then this guy comes along and runs it in fifty-seven seconds flat. Maybe the coach cheated; maybe the watch was broken. Whatever the reason, we just don't want to face it.

We like heroes who inspire us, but we also like to imagine that we might have come close to being like them – to doing what they did – if we had only had the opportunity, or if we were young again, or when we got a little older, or whatever. But Jesus is too much hero. He plays way beyond us. While He seems so similar, He also has motives and awareness that simply go beyond what we can imagine achieving or sustaining for any length of time. So admiration turns to jealousy, or doubt. We try to find some way to bring Him down – to doubt the stories, or to doubt that He is really like they say. Somebody must have exaggerated, or lied, or changed the records, or simply misunderstood. Only the gullible could believe that such a man really lives. Please God, don't let it be true that some man lives so far beyond us!

We have heard it all before, haven't we, down through the ages? And as a last resort, we can dislike His friends. But it doesn't really matter *how* we do it; just do *anything* to get away from the reputation and presence of somebody who calls us to a LIFE that seems too high – a LIFE that scares us because we know it is beyond our normal motives and borders. Jesus is too much hero. If you have known and gotten past this, remember that many of your friends have not. Have a little patience and understanding. Don't be surprised, as if such a reaction were unheard of, when in fact it has been going on since the beginning. Jesus is too much hero. The world can turn suddenly, even ragefully, jealous. We don't like the comparison if we think ourselves already pretty good, pretty okay, pretty close to all that God could want or expect of us. It doesn't seem fair, when *we* try so hard, to suddenly discover this man who lives far beyond us. So have a care. This little baby can bite, without meaning any harm, just by being Himself – just doing what He was sent here to do. *“And Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, ‘Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed – and a sword will pierce even your own soul – to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.’”* (Luke 2:34) Well, that's just one of those Scripture passages – what does it know?

What is it that Jesus does that makes Him such an incredible hero? Some of us, when we are young, are not put off because Jesus is too much hero. He seems rather tame and unexciting in comparison to other heroes. Other people carry footballs through enormous resistance, scoring touchdowns with half the other team hanging off their backs. Or they draw six-shooters with the speed of light and always side with justice and the right. Or they kill dragons about to devour fair maidens. Or they build vast empires by the sword, by choo-choo trains, by shrewd investments, or by microchips. Or they find cures for dread diseases, they mother clans that hold enormous influence for four or five generations, or they write or teach things that inspire millions. What does Jesus do? Well, He conquers sin, death, and the Devil. But that doesn't come very clear when we are young. Nobody has told us yet that the hardest battles are on the inside, or that the story of St. George and the Dragon is just a pale reflection of the battle between Jesus and Lucifer, the great winged Seraph (Serpent).

Calling it straight: Jesus does display some remarkable influence over the physical environment. But only a tiny handful of people ever see or derive any direct benefit. Mostly He turns people back toward their

own relationship with God. And He makes religious leaders angry – He has a great talent for that. And quite a remarkable number of people end up loving Him, and each other because of Him. Oh yes, and He rises from the dead – primarily, it seems, so He can go on with the friendship thing: being a friend, and creating more friendships. And that is the only way, so far as we can figure out, that He changes the world: the friendship thing.

Not much of a hero, at first glance. Only, His friendships keep spreading, and they have an incredible impact everywhere they go in the world. People literally go different, get fearless, start loving life, start having a great patience and belief in other people. They stop *using* people and start *loving* people. That doesn't sound like much at first, but in the long run, it is a huge change. Most of the followers become amazing contributors. Most of them get into quite a bit of trouble, too. Most of them, like the One they follow, end up with a remarkable group of friends. Most of them have some passion about life that sets them apart, yet they do not look for fame. They love life, yet they are not afraid of death. How does Jesus do this to them? What strange kind of hero is this?

For years, we have developed the formulas and the creeds – our efforts to explain what makes Jesus so great. Now the creeds and the formulas are overworked and outworn for most folk. Not that nobody believes them, just that the belief is old and rote and uninspired for lots of people. “Jesus saves” may be true enough, but after you see it from billboards and neon lights for long enough, it's just another cliché. And so it is with: Jesus, the Son of God; Jesus the Christ; Jesus, the lamb who taketh away the sins of the world; He died on the Cross to save us from sin; washed in the blood of the lamb; this is my body, broken for you, and my blood poured out for the remission of your sins.

Please understand that I'm not poking fun at any of this. For me, it is all incredibly significant, meaningful, true, and right. It has always spoken somewhere deep in my soul. But half the time, I couldn't make head nor tail of what it was signifying. It drove me to seminary, and I've been reading books, writing papers and sermons and classes, and getting into discussions with other Christians about it for over forty-five years. The more meaningful it all becomes to me, the more I seem to detect that for many of my Christian friends, it is mostly verbiage. They have a deep faith and a rock-hard conviction that somehow Jesus has it figured out and that He will see us through. But the words and phrases and creeds are not helping. Most of these folk have never seen an actual animal

sacrifice in their entire lives. And Jesus, “the lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world” – Jesus, the divine sacrifice who was killed on a cross so that the loving God’s terrible wrath would not destroy us – I’m sorry, but that imagery is not really getting through to most of the Christians I know. Those who use such language use it more like a cheer at a football game, rather than a hymn of praise that resounds within the soul. Some vague forgiveness cult may be helpful to some, but others are not even sure why they need that much forgiveness. Or if they do need that much forgiveness, they don’t understand how Jesus dying so painfully and crudely so many generations ago has anything to do with them, even if they have made bad mistakes.

It says in our bylaws somewhere that I am supposed to preach the Gospel around here. It’s not that I don’t want to. And it’s not that you don’t want me to. But there is such an overlay of baggage and verbiage from the past that I cannot always tell if any meaning is still getting through. Some of you have worked through and into the old language, and it speaks to you like it does to me. But it is almost impossible to tell when that is true, or for whom.

For just a little bit, here in the quiet interim between Christmas and the New Year, let us talk about what Jesus really does for us. This is not the full picture. This is one tiny facet of the great jewel of the Gospel. But try to take all the old language and creed out of it and listen for something your own heart can respond to.

One of the biggest barriers to “church” in our time – that is, to Christian community – is busyness. Most people do not believe that being part of Jesus’ people is important enough to warrant a significant change in their schedules. To them, church may be nice but it’s not very important; we don’t really need each other’s love and support to live the Christian Life. Therefore, dozens of other desires and purposes take the time and resources of Jesus’ people before they ever start to be the church together. As a result, the church limps along at half-mast, which in turn makes it obvious that the church is not really very important. We could consider this barrier a secondary concern, except it matches so well with a primary concern.

Which leads us to the biggest barrier to the Christian Faith in our time: The belief that we are pretty much okay with God just like we are – that we already love God, and that God thinks we live relatively good Christian lives already. Be careful now – what follows is not about guilt. It is about being real.

The Christmas story reveals that there is *animosity* between our world and God. The final result is that the world kills the Son. But that is not merely the ending; it is true all along the way. The family is running for this baby's life from the very beginning. Of course, that's because of the bad guys, and none of us are ever the bad guys. It is never us; it's the Nazis. But why do they always have the power, and how come we are always running away? And how come the Son of God always ends up killed in this world, with His people fading into the shadows, if everybody loves Him so much?

There are two major stances of animosity toward God. First, there is an outright anger and hatred. It comes because God has seemed to us to be so cruel. A loved one died or some tyrant caused mayhem, and God did not put a stop to it. Or our own lives have been harsh and brutal, and we never got any help from God that we could see. People suffer and starve and are sick or brutalized all over the world, and ultimately it has to be put at God's door because God is the Creator who made this place. No baby in a manger can make up for all the suffering and turmoil. So lots of people carry a deep hatred toward God in their hearts. Sometimes it comes out in dramatic acts of anger, and sometimes it is just a smoldering determination never to have anything to do with this cruel God.

The second stance of animosity looks much friendlier, on the surface. It does not blame God for all the evil in the world. It even acknowledges that God's laws and precepts try to guide us toward a better life. And it claims a serious intention to live by these standards and moral precepts. We will be good, *but ...* we want nothing to do with God personally. We can take God "in general" and try to cooperate with God's ways "in general," but we do not want God messing in our personal choices or telling us how to live in any specific or personal ways. Why is this a stance of animosity? Because if we trusted a loving God, we would want as much contact and personal direction as we could possibly get.

So, God can go his way and we will go ours, and we hope God will approve of most that we do, and maybe even think of us as on his side. And if he wants to bless us from afar, that would be okay too. But none of this surrender stuff, or turning will or life over to God. We may be friends, but not *that* close! Of course, ultimately this stance is as big a barrier to the Christian Life as outright rebellion and opposition.

Underneath the animosity is fear. I don't think most of us think of ourselves as fearful people. A lot of it is subconscious, or tucked away in behavior that has other, more palatable explanations. Since most of us learn early on that learning to control fear is one of the most important factors in our survival, naturally we bury it under anything we can find. And that's fine, unless we forget our own tricks and think the fear is not there at all anymore. Then it controls us and we don't even know what's going on.

Jesus spends a lot of His ministry dealing with fear. First of all, He tries to help people keep their fear clear – to separate their fear of displeasing people or religious institutions or Roman soldiers from their fear of displeasing God, and to separate their fear of physical survival from their fear of spiritual survival. Secondly, He tries to teach people to move from fear of God to faith or trust in God. And ultimately, Jesus' mission is to lead people from a life where others control them, or where they themselves are in charge of their own lives, to a life where, trusting in God's personal love, they can live day to day and minute to minute in the awareness of God's presence and guidance. We call it "reconciliation" – reconciliation through Jesus proving God's care; proving God will not smite us even if we kill his Son; proving, through the Resurrection, that God's presence will stay with us, forgiving and guiding: "*Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.*" (Matthew 28:20) In short, Jesus cuts through the animosity and fear and invites us back into a personal relationship with God, wherein we ourselves walk with God and seek God's will and WAY for our own lives on a daily basis.

That is how Jesus saves us. Not some courtroom scene or some act of propitiation that leaves us as fearful of the next mistake as we should have been about the last one. But I would not have you thinking that this is somehow my idea, or some newfangled notion trying to trade psychology for theology. It comes straight out of the heart of our Christian tradition. It is at least as ancient as the foundation of any Catholic creed or dogma: "*Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting our trespasses against us, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.*" (II Corinthians 5:17-20)

“Merry” does not just mean cheerful, happy, or jovial, you know. Oh, it means those things too, but Robin Hood and his “Merry Men” were not merely singing tunes throughout the forest. “Merry” means dauntless, bold, courageous, undiscouragable. If you want a *Merry* Christmas, turn your will and your life over to God as Jesus revealed God to be. Be done with life on your own terms, or life in dread or fear of any earthly outcome or pressure. Jesus invites us to a life with the Holy Spirit in charge of our days, and to a lifetime of learning how to make that more true every day.

The relationship on the inside is the real power. The outside is only a hint, a reaction, a response. Let the world’s Christmas fade from sight. Let the real Christmas begin, and continue within you forever.