

WHAT CHILD IS THIS?

The thing that is so surprising about Christmas – the part that is just as new now as it ever was – is the link, the eerie, unfathomable link between the manger child and the child within each of us. We celebrate Jesus' birthday. But if we really know it is Jesus' birthday, then we know it is our birthday too. In His coming, we find our own true lives.

Wonderful as this world is, it is hard to be our true selves here. The child within us also feels born into danger; born on a lowly, lonely night with no room in the inn and without much of a reception. And Christmas says to that child within us: "Come forth and be bold and come to Life anyway! It is time you were born into this world too!" To "know" Jesus is to be born anew – to be awakened to one's true inner self as well as to the infinite realms of the Spirit. That is what Christmas has always been about. This is a good time to remember it.

Christmas can be exhausting sometimes because we – or maybe I should just say "I" – keep trying to celebrate it without getting personally involved. Well, I get involved in the celebrating – the gifts and singing and everything – but it is all about something outside of me and apart from me. It's a lot of hard work to be so close to Christmas information – touching all of the symbols – and still keep my inner self unconnected.

Yet it seems really important to keep unconnected. After all, this is supposed to be about God incarnate – the High King of Heaven. So if we start to feel connections in any way, we think to ourselves, "How crass! I'm always so self-centered. Can't I even make it through this wondrous, special season about Jesus the Christ, who teaches us about loving others, without always having to get my own 'self' into the picture?"

Then many of us give a few uppercuts and several jabs to the old ego and try to get back into celebrating Christmas without having our selves in the way – that is, trying to leave our selves as much out of the picture as possible. And maybe some of us even vaguely remember ancient scenes from childhood when we got too interested in other people's presents, and our parents tried to help us see that we were not always supposed to be the center of attention.

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If ever there is a day in all the history of vast creation when you are supposed to be the center of attention, Christmas is that day! The almighty, omniscient, eternal, unspeakable God – in some mystery we describe endlessly but never understand – comes out of the higher dimensions we call Heaven for only one reason: to get close to you! God is more bothered by the distance and alienation than even we are. At least God is taking all the initiative.

If you truly realize that on Christmas your attention should be all on God, then it is also true that the second you focus on God, you also see that God's attention is all on you. After all, God does not come here for a vacation. It is no picnic for God here! Yet half the rules and agenda of the universe is warped, bent, or suspended because God wants so badly to get close to you.

One of my favorite themes of all time is the image of Jesus as the "Prince in Disguise." Maybe it wasn't God's intention, only our enormous density, but it still comes out looking like God – the High King – sneaks into the world in beggars' garb (isn't that where all the stories come from?) to be close to us and find out what it's really like to be just an ordinary citizen of the realm.

What is the climax of the story? Eventually, to everyone's amazement, the Prince's true identity is revealed and things get straightened out. That is, things get straightened out to the delight of those who love the Prince, and to the undoing of those who have usurped the Prince's power and abused it or used it for their own ends.

So we have our Easter when the Prince's true identity is revealed, and traditionally we have a Second Coming when everything will get straightened out. But I left something out. We almost always do. There is another climax to this story: this is a Prince in Disguise who comes to tell you that so are you!

When we recognize who Jesus really is, that is the climax of the story from our side, from our point of view. When, as a result of knowing Him and believing in Him, we recognize who we really are, that is the climax of the story from Heaven's side. That is what it was all about. That is what it was for and why it was worth it. That is why "The Lord Christ came down" You are the focus of the story from Heaven's point of view.

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When was it that you forgot that you are a child of the Great King? It has been so long ago for most of us that we cannot even remember. It is as if we never knew. And that is exactly and precisely what is wrong in this strife-torn world of ours. We do not know – or we do not remember – our origins, our identity, our purpose. Therefore, for as long as we are thus blind, we cannot clearly see the divinity of anything or anyone else around us.

Therefore I love the haunting refrain and the way it tugs at the soul: “What child is this?” Is it who they say? Is it really the One? Is it the Great Prince in Disguise? And as we get closer to answering that question, we discover that other questions are right behind it, hanging onto its very heels: What child is it who asks the question about “What child is this?”? What child is it who responds so mightily to finding the wonder of the Christ child? What child is it who is so important that the Christ child would come out of Heaven to find it, love it, die for it, and call it to come home?

Sometimes we remember how the real story began: *“He was in the world, but the world, though it owed its very being to him, did not recognize him. He entered his own realm, and his own would not receive him.”* (John 1:10-11)

The lights, carols, cards, presents, and indeed the whole atmosphere of celebration seem to suggest that all of us everywhere have now recognized and acknowledged and given our allegiance to the true Prince and that He need not come in disguise any longer. Is it really true? Is it really that simple? Some still seek a deeper revealing, one that is quiet, deep within, and powerful enough to change us: to change our attitudes, our thoughts, and our goals – to change our very WAY of Life.

There is a Christmas on the calendar. There is also a Christmas in the soul, when the child of the manger speaks to the child within and says, “Yes, I am the true Prince, but you are also a princess or a prince, and I have come for you, that we may be together and walk together – day by day.”

The words are so old – and so new. I want you to know that I am not making it up. It is not my message. It is not yours either. But it is for us. We have all heard it a hundred times. And yet, have we ever heard it? It is not talking about Jesus or Jesus’ virgin birth. It is talking about you and *your* virgin birth.

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Here it is, right out of the first chapter of John's gospel, probably the second most familiar passage in the whole New Testament. Are you ready?

“But to all who did receive him, to those who have yielded him their allegiance, he gave the right to become children of God, not born of any human stock or by the fleshly desire of a human father, but the offspring of God himself.” (John 1:12-13)

You see? I did not make it up. And John and Paul (in Galatians) agree. That is the meaning of this magic day. If ever there is to be an event in which you are supposed to be the center of attention, this is it! Oh let the child of the manger speak to the child within you – to teach and reveal to you that this is your birthday too!