

**You Are Christmas**

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Isaiah 61:1-3

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Christmas is not in the gifts, or the carols, or the candles, or the trees. Christmas is not a date on the calendar. Christmas is a part of every now and it is you. It has been this way from the beginning of time and space. The Big Bang is the beginning of Christmas for it is the beginning of God's love made flesh. God comes as a baby every minute of every day in every part of creation, including the part that is you.

Sometimes our fears of life overwhelm our belief in Christmas. Sometimes we fear that no tomorrow will come to us, to our children or our world. Sometimes we forget Christmas and then we wait in the dark praying for someone to light the candle we cannot find. On the longest night of the year, we hold a vigil for the birth of God to come into our darkness. And inevitably the light comes and Christmas is again ours.

This belief in Christmas, in the forever coming of grace, is the old time religion. And when we are afraid, it is good to remember the old time religion, to return to the roots of our faith and remember that God has made us to be like God; that we are, in the fundamental truth of ourselves, God's likeness in the world; that we are Christmas come to life.

The writers of Genesis knew this old time religion when they wrote of God:

God created people in God's likeness,  
in the image of God they were created,  
male and female God made them....

God blessed them...

And God saw that it was very good.

Because it is so easy to forget how we are made and what is to become of us; so easy to forget that we live as Christmas people, we must tell the story again and again that God is born in us and that we are God made flesh. Because we forget, we must every year celebrate the coming of Christmas so that we will be reminded that God has made us, sustains us, heals us, and makes of us love for the world.

The prophet Isaiah, in the eighth century, lived in a time of forgetfulness. There were great political and military powers in Thebes, Damascus and Babylon; powers that threatened to destroy Israel, Judah and all her people. The kings forgot that God was in them and for them and they became afraid for themselves and afraid for the people. They turned from God and chose to seek safety in weapons and politics. One of them, King Ahaz of Judah, had so forgotten that God was his safety he replaced the temple worship of God with the worship of the gods of Babylon.

And when the kings forgot God, most of the people forgot God and in their fear they too worshipped power, and armies, and gold. But their forgetfulness and their turning betrayed them. And they were destroyed by the very ones they hoped would be their savior. And

most of the people of God were carried away from their homes by foreign armies, taken to far lands and made slaves.

A few, however, remembered the name of God and remembered that it was God who ruled history, their history and the history of their nation. A few remembered who had made them, and who they were, and whose they were. And in them the prophet Isaiah saw Christmas. And for them he wrote:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners;  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,  
and the day of vengeance of our God  
to comfort all who mourn in Zion -  
to give them a garland instead of ashes,  
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,  
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.  
They will be called oaks of justice,  
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.<sup>1</sup>

Isaiah saw, even in destruction, that God was present in each one, even in the enemy. Isaiah asked King Ahaz and all the people to remember that the spirit of the Lord was upon them and they need not fear.

It is the old time religion that Mary quotes when she finds herself pregnant. She remembers the words of the prophet, judge and anointer of the first two kings of Israel, Samuel, who saw that God was present in every time and in everyone. She sees in her untimely, unpromising, and unacceptable pregnancy God's spirit. She sees Christmas where others only see darkness and shame. And when others are calling for her death she sings:

My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.  
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed;  
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.<sup>2</sup>

Mary knows that the child she carries will be another birth of God. And so she sings her faith as if Jesus were already God present. For in a strange kind of way, the baby has come in her and she is Emmanuel, she is God made flesh, she holds the promise of the world. Christmas is our lives pregnant with grace and love, with God's creation of us and in us.

We make the story of God's birth, the birth of the child Jesus, the focus of our Christmas' faith. We know the tale. There is no great secret to God among us, in us, being us. The baby is born in

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 61:1-3

<sup>2</sup> Luke 1:46-49

a hillside cave made for sheep and shepherds to hide from storms. Unlike the great temple and the synagogues of the towns, it is a place filled with straw, manure and poverty. It is the least likely place, yet even here, and perhaps especially here, God comes.

In this baby we begin to see ourselves for we are such babies born in unlikely places. We are babies born by the spirit of God. We are babies whose compassion, thirst for justice, and insatiable desire to give and receive love, is God among us.

When we are afraid we forget ourselves, we forget that we have been made in the very likeness of God. We forget that the spirit of God is upon us, is us bringing good news to all. We forget that God has looked upon and made us pregnant with the salvation of the world.

Christmas season reminds us that Jesus was born just as we are born. Christmas reminds us that God made us and when we are our truest selves, our real selves, ourselves, then we are God made flesh.

Beverly Bartlett writes:

*It was just a few more days until Christmas in San Francisco, and the shopping downtown was starting to get to us. I remember crowds of people waiting impatiently for slow-moving buses and streetcars on those little cement islands in the middle of the street. Most of us were loaded down with packages, and it looked like many of us were beginning to wonder if all those countless friends and relatives actually deserved so many gifts in the first place. This was not the Christmas spirit I'd been raised with.*

*When I finally found myself virtually shoved up the steps of a jammed streetcar, the idea of standing there packed like a sardine the whole way home was almost more than I could take. What I would have given for a seat! I must have been in some kind of exhausted daze because as people gradually got off, it took me a while to notice that there was room to breathe again.*

*Then I saw something out of the corner of my eye. A small, dark-skinned boy - he couldn't have been more than five or six - tugged on a woman's sleeve and asked, "Would you like a seat?" He quietly led her to the closest free seat he could find. Then he set out to find another tired person. As soon as each rare, new seat became available, he would quickly move through the crowd in search of another burdened woman who desperately needed to rest her feet.*

*When I finally felt the tug on my own sleeve, I was absolutely dazzled by the beauty in this little boy's eyes. He took my hand, saying, "Come with me," and I think I'll remember that smile as long as I live. As I happily placed my heavy load of packages on the floor, the little emissary of love immediately turned to help his next subject.*

*The people on the streetcar, as usual, had been studiously avoiding each other's eyes, but now they began to exchange shy glances and smiles. A businessman offered a section of newspaper*

to the stranger next to him; three people stooped to return a gift that had tumbled to the floor. And now people were speaking to one another. That little boy had tangibly changed something - we all relaxed into a subtle feeling of warmth and actually enjoyed the trip through the final stops along the route.

I didn't notice when the child got off. I looked up at one point and he was gone. When I reached my stop I practically floated off that streetcar, wishing the driver a happy holiday, noticing the sparkling Christmas lights on my street in a fresh, new way. Or maybe I was seeing them in an old way, with the same open wonder I felt when I was five or six. I thought, "So that's what they mean by And a little child shall lead them...."<sup>3</sup>

*Play video: It's In Every One of Us (4 minutes, 15 seconds)*

Christmas is now and in every one of us. We need fear nothing forever. You are Christmas. Amen and Shalom.

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<sup>3</sup> Beverly M. Bartlett, "A Christmas Story," from *Chicken Soup for the Woman's Soul*, (Health Communications Inc. Deerfield Beach, Florida, 1996), pp.205-6