

We've now passed the winter solstice, and CHRISTmas Eve is just hours away. Although resident meteorologist Dave Larko predicts that there will be no "white Christmas" for us, festivity is in the air nonetheless. If you'd like one more short video to "get in the mood," "control-click" on the photo to the right and you'll see a very nice one.



Even though the world works very hard to keep Christ out of CHRISTmas, and while merchants frenetically fill our mailboxes and inboxes with attempts to get us spend, spend, spend, the point of the occasion, of course, is the birth of Jesus. More importantly, the point of the occasion is the **Incarnation** of God, the enfleshment of the Eternal in human vulnerability and frailty.

Now while it's easy for those of us who have followed Jesus for a while to begin to take it for granted, the Incarnation is both a Really Big Deal and a Rather Large Problem. As Paul put it, God in human flesh is "*a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles*" (1 Corinthians 1:23). It has ever been so, and remains so to this day.

For some these days, the idea of God is foolish all by itself. Astrophysicist Neil Degrasse Tyson, though a wonderful host of television science shows, is one of many who so contend. Others, who are willing to posit some sort of "divine being," find the idea of enfleshment or incarnation to be no better than a "B" movie about the ancient gods of Greece or Rome—not worthy of serious consideration at all.



The truth of the matter is that no one, Jew and Christian alike, was looking for the Incarnation, and the event was as shocking for those to whom Jesus first came as it is to many today. Indeed, even those of us for whom the Story is a familiar one, might be shocked were we to review once more what is really going on here.

One of my very favorite stories about the shock and wonder of what's really going on in the CHRISTmas Story is Barbara Robinson's classic, *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*.¹ One of our family's CHRISTmas rituals is to read this short story out loud together every year. I'm looking forward to it already.

The end of the book is my favorite part, and I'm usually sniffing so much at that point that Jill has to finish the reading. If you don't know the story, it's about six children "from you-know-where," the worst of whom is Imogene. They commandeer the church Christmas

¹ Robinson, Barbara (2011-02-22). *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever (The Herdmans series Book 1)* (Kindle Locations 731-732). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

pageant, terrorize children and adults right and left, and then the pageant performance itself ends with a most unexpected development:



“Everyone had been waiting all this time for the Herdmans to do something absolutely unexpected. And sure enough, that was what happened.

“Imogene Herdman was crying.

“In the candlelight her face was all shiny with tears and she didn’t even bother to wipe them away. She just sat there—awful old Imogene—in her crooked veil, crying and crying and crying.

“Well, it was the best Christmas pageant we ever had. Everybody said so, but nobody seemed to know why. When it was over people stood around the lobby of the church talking about what was different this year. There was something special, everyone said—said—they couldn’t put their finger on what.

“Mrs. Wendleken said, ‘Well, Mary the mother of Jesus had a black eye; that was something special. But only what you might expect,’ she added.

“She meant that it was the most natural thing in the world for a Herdman to have a black eye. But actually nobody hit Imogene and she didn’t hit anyone else. Her eye wasn’t really black either, just all puffy and swollen. *She had walked into the corner of the choir-robe cabinet, in a kind of daze—as if she had just caught onto the idea of God, and the wonder of Christmas.*

“And this was the funny thing about it all. For years, I’d thought about the wonder of Christmas, and the mystery of Jesus’ birth, and never really understood it. But now, because of the Herdmans, it didn’t seem so mysterious after all.

“When Imogene had asked me what the pageant was about, I told her it was about Jesus, but that was just part of it. It was about a new baby, and his mother and father who were in a lot of trouble— no money, no place to go, no doctor, nobody they knew. And then, arriving from the East (like my uncle from New Jersey) some rich friends.

“But Imogene, I guess, didn’t see it that way. *Christmas just came over her all at once, like a case of chills and fever. And so she was crying, and walking into the furniture.*

“Afterward there were candy canes and little tiny Testaments for everyone, and a poinsettia plant for my mother from the whole Sunday school. We put the costumes away and folded up the collapsible manger, and just before we left, my father snuffed out the last of the tall white candles.

“I guess that’s everything,’ he said as we stood at the back of the church. ‘All over now. It was quite a pageant.’ Then he looked at my mother. ‘What’s that you’ve got?’

“It’s the ham,² she said. ‘They wouldn’t take it back. They wouldn’t take any candy either, or any of the little Bibles. But Imogene did ask me for a set of the Bible-story pictures, and she took out the Mary picture and said it was exactly right, whatever that means.’

“I think it meant that no matter how she herself was, Imogene liked the idea of the Mary in the picture—all pink and white and pure-looking, as if she never washed the dishes or cooked supper or did anything at all except have Jesus on Christmas Eve.

“But as far as I’m concerned, Mary is always going to look a lot like Imogene Herdman—sort of nervous and bewildered, but ready to clobber anyone who laid a hand on her baby. And the Wise Men are always going to be Leroy and his brothers, bearing ham.

“When we came out of the church that night it was cold and clear, with crunchy snow underfoot and bright, bright stars overhead. And I thought about the Angel of the Lord—Gladys, with her skinny legs and her dirty sneakers sticking out from under her robe, yelling at all of us, everywhere:



“Hey! Unto you a child is born!”

Or, as Katelyn Beaty put it, “The trick about the Incarnation—God becoming *man*; *God* becoming man—is that it can’t be sold, scheduled, or enjoyed in the way a glass of eggnog or a new gadget can. It refuses to bend to the rules of the market. It can only be beheld. The same God who made the world, lived in the world and passed through the grave and the gate of death. This is the Great Rescue Plan of God, initiated before time itself to save sinners from death. *It is salvation. Come and behold.*”³

Joy-full CHRISTmas to you.

Dave

P.S. I don’t want to ruin your CHRISTmas (!), but there will be no *Laptop* for the next two weeks. Next week I’ll be on a few days of vacation while the building is closed for renovations; the week after I’ll be on a few days of sermon planning retreat. I won’t miss any services ☺.

² This was the Herdmans’ Christmas ham from Social Services, which the boys had brought in lieu of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

³ Katelyn Beaty, “The Poverty of Christmas,” *Christianity Today*, December 2015, 26.