

God's Gift to You this CHRISTmas: Joy

1 Peter 1:3-9 ¹

Counting this afternoon, there are five shopping days left until CHRISTmas. How are you doing?

It's probably too late to ship anything. CHRISTmas cards should have been mailed a long time ago. What parties and special gatherings were possible during COVID are probably over. Finalizing travel plans—if there are any—is becoming urgent. Money is quickly draining from our bank accounts. Celebrating an American Christmas is hard work!

While CHRISTmas is hard work for us all, it is harder for some than for others. Some of us are making our first grief-filled trip through December without a loved one who was resurrected this year. Some of us are struggling with physical pain and disease even at this moment. Some of us are struggling with emotional and spiritual pain that takes the shape of worry, loneliness, or discouragement, and this suffering is made harder by the joy others are experiencing.

Wherever you find yourself this morning, one of God's gifts to you this CHRISTmas is strength to move forward on the journey that is uniquely your own. If you're in the situation of needing physical strength for these days, but don't feel yourself particularly in need of greater spiritual strength in the ways I've mentioned, I want to begin by inviting you to pray for sisters and brothers around you who are in need of encouragement today.

Even this morning, your day may have begun as it did for a mother named Tracy. Tracy had had a difficult week, a chaotic mess of petty crises followed by a rash of minor accidents, all mixed together in a soup of crazy busyness. On Sunday morning, she was tired and cranky, and she didn't want to go to church at all, much less serve as one of the worship leaders.

Things went from bad to worse when Tracy went into the living room and saw that her daughter, Brenna, had written all over the picture window with a grease pencil—from top to bottom and from side to side. Tracy was at the point of explosion until she saw what Brenna had written with eight year-old spelling: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindnece, goodnece, faithfulnece, gentnece and selfcantrol*.

Tracy stopped and drank it all in. Her heart flooded with light. This was exactly what she needed to remember: that the fruit of the Spirit develops in all kinds of circumstances by the work of God's Spirit within us. And then Tracy noticed one more thing Brenna had written at the edge of the window: *Love one another*. Only Brenna, in her childish spelling, had written: *Love won another*. Tracy was overwhelmed by joy as she encountered the real wonder of CHRISTmas once again.²

Eugene Peterson, translator of *The Message*, noted that "Once a year, at CHRISTmas, for a few days at least, we and millions of our neighbors turn aside from our ordinary preoccupations and join together in a community of wonder. The wonder keeps us open-eyed, expectant, alive to life that is more than we can account for, that exceeds our expectations, that is beyond anything that we can make. . . ."

"Birth, simply as birth, even though usually greeted with wonder and celebration, has a way of getting absorbed into business-as-usual far too soon. Birth in itself does not

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on December 20, 2020, the Fourth Sunday of Advent.

² Mark Buchanan, *Hidden in Plain Sight: The Secret of More* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007).

seem to compel belief in God. . . . So how did it happen that *this* birth, this *Jesus* birth, manages to set so many of us back on our heels in astonishment and gratitude and wonder?

“The brief answer is that this wasn’t just any birth. The baby’s parents and first witnesses were convinced that God was entering human history in human form. Their conviction was confirmed by visitations of angels and shepherds and Magi, and an extraordinary child grew into an extraordinary man right before their eyes, right in their neighborhood. When He came into His own, more and more people became convinced, and men, women, and children from all over the world continue to be convinced right up to the present moment.”³ The Wonder and the Joy continue even now.

CHRISTmas was approaching in the Asimakoupoulos home, and five-year-old Lauren was playing with a miniature plastic nativity set. At dinner time, Lauren had placed pieces of the nativity set at each person’s plate. She had invited the shepherds, the wise men, the cows and the sheep to join the family for dinner. As her father, Greg, appreciated her work, Lauren raced into the kitchen:

“Daddy, *Daddy!*” Her voice was panicked. “*Jesus is missing!* We’ve looked everywhere and we can’t find him!”

“We’ll find him,” Greg said, sure that Jesus was stuck under the couch cushions or behind a chair somewhere. “We’ll look after we eat.”

“And look we did,” he wrote later. “High and low. Low and high. Under the couch. In the plants. In the Barbie playhouse. We scoured Lauren’s coloring desk cluttered with stickers, markers, crayons, and a half-full can of pop—everything but Jesus! Finally, I zeroed in on Lauren’s backpack.

“Much like her older sisters, Lauren carries her backpack everywhere she goes. In it she transports her treasures: Hair bows. Hats. Barbies. Her stuffed kitty. Her Polly Pockets. Her plastic wallet. Gummi Bears. I decided to look in the backpack; and there, at the bottom of her treasure trove, was Jesus.

“Here He is!” I proudly announced. “Jesus was in your backpack, ready to go with you to preschool tomorrow.”

Later, Greg wrote, “I’ve often reflected on the search for our MIA Jesus, and I now realize that He wasn’t ‘missing in action’ at all. He was right in the *middle* of the action. His place in Lauren’s backpack was divinely appropriate. There, in the midst of all the symbols of my daughter’s interests and activities, was the Lord of life. And that reality extends beyond five-year-old girls.”

Greg continued, “As we face a season crammed with commitments, each of us can begin the New Year confident that Jesus is right here in the middle of it all. As much as it drives us crazy not to have the Jesus piece in its proper place in the crèche (or at the dinner table), He really does belong in our minivans, briefcases, purses, gym bags, suitcases, and checkbooks.

“God’s uncontainable love for His creation spilled over into a manger, a carpenter’s shop, a fishing boat, a tax collector’s home, a Roman execution, a rich man’s grave, and an upper room. The good news of CHRISTmas that catapults us toward Easter (and

³ Eugene Peterson, “It’s a Wonder-Full Life: It takes a special kind of birth to grab the world’s attention,” reprinted from *God With Us: Rediscovering the Meaning of CHRISTmas* (Paraclete Press, 2007) in *Christianity Today*, December 2007, 34.

beyond) is that we are not alone. The One who made us has come to us and remains with us in all the circumstances of our lives.”⁴

My friends, in a year overtaken by COVID’s fear and grief, you and I need a vision of what God is up to that is larger than what we can see and that pulls us forward into a future better than how things are right now. Something like that happened to Jeremy Begbie when he attended worship in a poor South African township:

“Before the service,” he wrote, “I was told that a tornado had cut through the township the week before, ripping apart fifty homes and killing five people. And just the night before, a gang had attacked a fourteen-year-old member of the church’s Sunday school and stabbed him to death.

“The pastor began his opening prayer: ‘Lord! You are our Creator and Sovereign, but why did the wind come like a snake and tear off our roofs? Why did a mob cut short the life of one of our children, when he had everything to live for? Over and over again, Lord, we find ourselves living in the midst of death.’

“As he spoke, the congregation responded with a dreadful sighing and groaning. But then, once the prayer was finished, the whole congregation slowly began to sing, very quietly at first, and then louder. They sang and they sang, song after song of praise—praise to a God who had in Jesus plunged into the very worst life can bring in order to give us a promise of an ending beyond all imagining. The singing gave the congregation a foretaste of that end.

“Christian Hope,” Jeremy wrote, “isn’t about looking around at the state of things as they are now and trying to imagine where it’s all going. Christian Hope is not about trying to extrapolate the future from the present. It’s about breathing even now the fresh air of the Ending, tasting the spices and sipping the wine of the Great Feast that is to come.”⁵

Gordon MacDonald told a similar story: “A Nigerian woman who is a physician at a great teaching hospital in the United States came out of the crowd today to say something kind about the lecture I had just given. She introduced herself using an American name. ‘What’s your African name?’ I asked. She immediately gave it to me, several syllables long with a musical sound to it. ‘What does the name mean?’ I wondered.

She answered, “It means ‘Child who takes the anger away.’”

“When I inquired as to why she would have been given this name, she said, ‘My parents had been forbidden by their parents to marry. But they loved each other so much that they defied the family opinions and married anyway. For several years they were ostracized from both their families. Then my mother became pregnant with me. And when the grandparents held me in their arms for the first time, the walls of hostility came down. I became the one who swept the anger away. And that’s the name my mother and father gave me.’

“It occurred to me,” Gordon wrote, “that her name would be a suitable one for Jesus”:
Child Who Takes the Anger Away.⁶

⁴ Greg Asimakoupoulos, “Jesus is Missing,” *Christian Parenting Today* (November/December 2001).

⁵ Jeremy Begbie, “The Sense of an Ending,” in Dallas Willard, editor, *A Place for Truth* (InterVarsity Press, 2010).

⁶ Gordon MacDonald, *Leadership Weekly*, 11/6/2002.

You remember, I'm sure, that "Advent" means "coming" or "arrival," and that our season of Advent is preparation for the arrival of this divine Child Who Takes the Anger Away.

I want to conclude by taking this idea of preparation in a rather different direction. Astrophysicists tell us that our universe began quite abruptly 13.73 billion years ago. The *Journal of High Energy Physics* reported a few years ago that "According to recent studies, for the universe to produce the kinds of galaxies, stars, planets, and chemical elements essential for the existence of physical life, the cosmic mass density must be fine-tuned to at least one part in 10^{60} ."

"The cosmic dark energy density . . . on which all the matter and energy of the universe resides, must be fine-tuned to a least one part in 10^{120} . To put this number into perspective," the article wrote, "it exceeds the number of *protons* and *neutrons* in the observable universe by 100 billion quadrillion quadrillion times."⁷ Talk about fine tuning!

Physicist Freeman Dyson concluded that "The more I examine the universe and study the details of its architecture, the more evidence I find that the universe in some sense must have known that we were coming."⁸ Others, including astrophysicist Paul Davies, concede that for those with eyes to see, all the evidence points to a Designer: "It seems as though somebody has fine-tuned nature's numbers The impression of design is overwhelming."⁹ Does this begin to sound like "preparation"? And it gets even better than that!

Canadian astronomer Hugh Ross has written that "For the first time in cosmic history, light from the most distant galaxies and star clusters has reached the Milky Way Galaxy where human observers can detect it. Even the radiation left over from the cosmic creation event . . . is discernible."¹⁰ "Today," Ross noted, "astronomers can say with confidence that we have witnessed all of cosmic history, all the way to the very limits imposed by the laws of physics."¹¹

But, he continued, "Dark energy causes the universe's expansion to speed up as the cosmos ages. This energy has already accelerated the expansion so much that objects formed just after the creation event are moving away from human observers at nearly the velocity of light. Soon dark energy will cause the expansion to accelerate beyond light's velocity. When that happens, distant objects will no longer be visible from Earth.

"Humanity," Ross wrote, "lives at the only moment in cosmic history when the first-formed stars, the galaxies, and even the cosmic background radiation can be observed. From an evolutionary perspective, such a circumstance is sheer coincidence. From a biblical perspective, the Creator timed humanity's moment in cosmic history to facilitate discovery of His existence and of His attributes through observation and consideration of the heavens."¹²

What all of this means my friends, is that **God has been preparing for the season in which we live since before the beginning of time.** And this awareness helps us understand rather more than Paul himself did when he wrote, "*But when the time had fully come, God sent*

⁷ L. Dyson, M. Kleban, and L. Susskind, "Disturbing Implications of a Cosmological Constant," *Journal of High Energy Physics*, October 2002. http://arxiv.org/PS_cache/hep-th/pdf/0208/0208013v3.pdf, p. 19.

⁸ Freeman J. Dyson, *Disturbing the Universe* (NY: Basic Books, Perseus Books, 1979), p. 250.

⁹ Paul Davies, *The Cosmic Blueprint* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1986), p. 203.

¹⁰ Hugh Ross, *Creation as Science: A Testable Model Approach to End the Creation/Evolution Wars* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006), p. 100.

¹¹ Ross, pp. 85-86.

¹² Ross, pp. 100-102. See Psalm 19.

his Son, born of a woman, subject to the law. God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that he could adopt us as his very own children” (Galatians 4:4-5, NLT).¹³

“But when the time had fully come”: My friends, the life of Jesus is bracketed by two impossibilities: a virgin’s womb and an empty tomb. Jesus entered our world through a door marked “No Entrance” and He left through a door marked “No Exit.”¹⁴ And He did this in order that we might know His JOY.

At the end of His earthly ministry, Jesus told us, *“I have told you this so that my **joy** may be in you and that your **joy** may be complete”* (John 15:11). When the women ran back into Jerusalem from the empty tomb, they ran with **joy** (Matthew 28:8). When the two disciples ran back to Jerusalem from Emmaus, they ran with **joy** (Luke 24:52). And when you and I finally join the glad company of the City of Light, that, too, will be with **joy** (Jude 1:24).

You and I don’t know today how our paths will run until that **Joy** overtakes us, either individually or together. But because we are in Him, we are able to live through His Spirit in Faith, Hope, and Love until that **Joy** comes. And so, as CHRISTmas comes once more, I offer this blessing to you:

*And now ²⁴ To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence **without fault and with great joy**—²⁵ to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen (Jude 1:24-25).*

¹³ See also www.bethlehemstar.com.

¹⁴ Peter Larson, *Prism*, January/February 2001.