

Christmas Glory

ADVENT READINGS TO
DRAW YOU INTO WONDER

PIERCE TAYLOR HIBBS



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I

The Passion in a Promise



We easily forget what goes into a promise: the future. Promises stare into the beyond and say, “Yes. I will go there.” They travel into the dark out of love, out of passion, out of unexplainable joy. And they wait there, in the silence. They wait for the present. The present will have no idea what’s coming, of course. The present will get blindsided. And that’s a good thing. That’s a Christmas thing.

All the way back in Genesis 3:9, there was a promise that came unspoken. In the dim light of ancestral history, Adam and Eve were told clearly what would happen to them if they disobeyed. Then they disobeyed, but death *didn’t* come, did

it? It was just the quiet, the sound of their own feet swishing through the grass and planting their bodies behind a bush. The promise came in a question: *where are you?*

That doesn't sound like much of a promise, does it? But it is. The question opened a door for them to a different future. What they thought was the future for them, given their decision to disobey, was death. But the question directed them to another future—a warm hearth of fellowship with a God who already knew where they were are, where they'd been, and where they would be. For the God who knows *all*, the question *where are you?* is brimming with meaning. And chief among those meanings is the divine decision to show grace. God says, in effect, “I know where you are, but do *you*? Even though you've gone away, I see you. And I'm showing grace. I'm going to help you find yourself, find your way back to me.”

Who knew that the salvation of the world, the divine answer to all things broken and bleak, would start with a question? *Where are you?*

And think of the answer, that promise resting in the future, silent and serene like an

infant. Yes, now it makes beautiful sense that the answer to all our buried hope would be a baby, God in the flesh. What else could wait so perfectly for us? What else could blindsides the present but God as a child? How, with a wild wonder, could the present have ever imagined *this*? This was God's answer to that ancient question. *Where are you?* God would answer in the future. "Right here. And I'm with you. Hold me in your hands if you like. One day soon, *my* hands will hold *you*, even as they're stretched out and pinned to the wood I spoke into being."

Christmas is the joy of promise. It is the day of the great answer—the answer to the question that God himself asked at the beginning. *Where are you?* Right here. Right here, with you.

2

What Eyes Can See



My eyes are getting worse. I remember it every year when I look at our Christmas tree, gleaming gold with little amber stars, singing its quiet anthem into the dark of the room. I stare at the tree every year without my glasses on as a reminder that the world is blurring with time. My eyes see *less*. Every line of light is melting. I imagine what it will be like one day to be blind, to see only shadows, to dream of color in knife-sharp contours, to take in not just more light but more definition.

This all may sound depressing for Advent season, but I write with a smile on my face. We're

all fading floral. Some of us have enough color in our petals and vigor in our stem to pretend that death is a dream. Others of us are more aware of mortality. But the truth is truth for all of us. And what I stare at in my mind's eye each Christmas is what lies behind the blindness, something my eyes can't currently see. But my heart can see it, clear as a Pennsylvania hillside on a cold December morning.

What is it? It's hard to describe. Imagine a golden afternoon, where warm light is pouring in through the windows, and you're sitting contentedly on a couch, strangely aware that this particular afternoon will *never* end. You will be able to talk casually with God himself, holed up in your living room with an old afghan on his lap. Friends and family enter the room and raise their cheeks, showing their teeth in silence. The quiet, unending community . . . *that* is what my heart sees. Christmas is a memorial for warm-blooded, unending *communion*.

I wonder what you see this year, from your living room. There's a way to look *through* the room, to take off your glasses and let the lines blur.

You will see *more* in a sense, not *less*.

The old shepherds, gathering around the rough-hewn timber of a commoner's manger on that starry night, likely didn't see everything with 20-15 vision. Eyeglasses, after all, didn't appear on the pages of human history until thirteenth century Italy, donning the noses of quiet monks. These shepherds surely saw light, though the lines and textures of what they saw may have been blurred a bit. But that was not the point of the evening.

They beheld in that little stable a *person* who was light beyond light, the light behind all lights. That infant light didn't burn like the fiery sun, fierce and blinding, assaulting their retinas. No . . . it burned quiet, long, and slow, bright enough for them to know that something was different. Something had changed. The infant drew their souls in like moths. It captivated with its quiet; it beckoned with its shallow breaths, soft and simple, like the raising and lowering of a monarch's wings at the end of migration.

And it *was* a migration. God had come south to stay, down from the unsearchable northern Alps of divinity. He had come from a place so far above

us that not even a craning neck stood a chance of perceiving it on the horizon. God had come in his tribe of three: Son from Father by Spirit. He had come at the end of an evening, but he had come to *make* evening unending. He had come to cast communion down on us like starlight.

This is what I think of each year when I stare, bleary-eyed, at our Christmas tree, gazing at the green and gold without my glasses on. So what if the lines are blurred and the colors are melting together? The real beauty is behind all that. The real beauty is the unending afternoon of fellowship with God and his great afghan. The real beauty is what eyes cannot see. Except you *can* see it, if you pull your glasses off, maybe even shut your eyes, and let your heart stare at the warm hope of communion. Christmas is a time for staring.

3

A Deeper Magic



Evil hardly ever works out the way we think it will. Evil enters the labyrinth of God's providence like a blind man, feeling his way around the high cinder-block walls and unexpected turns. It exits when God wills, after it's already served his purposes. But we don't often see evil this way, or even believe in God's providence. We think of evil as a sharp shooter with lethal precision and unchecked freedom. Christmas is a reminder that evil, when it comes to it, can't even stand up to an infant.

In C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Lucy mourns the death of her great

lion, Aslan. Stabbed to the heart on a stone slab, surrounded by evil minions, Aslan appears lost. But then a *deeper magic* set in place by the Emperor beyond the Sea snapped that evil reality in half like a twig. Aslan rose from the dead. What appeared to be done was undone; an alleged victory for evil became its own death toll. C. S. Lewis knew it: evil exits the labyrinth of providence when God wills. In the end, no matter how horrid and horrendous it is, evil ends up being a servant, not a master.

Think of all this in the context of the Son of God breaking through a virgin's body to meet the light and air of our world, greeted by a chorus of grunts and foot-stomps from wet-nosed stable animals. Evil had been looking for the child, even before he was born. And evil would look for him after he entered the world (Matt. 2:16–18). But on the night of his birth, evil would not win (it never *really* does). The God of all things would enter the world he spoke, through the Word he spoke (John 1:1), by the Spirit who spoke it. Divine speech can't be silenced.

There is always a *deeper magic* at work around us. Evil seems to run rampant, to shred

and break and burn without resistance. It rears its ugly head in global pandemics and mudslides, but also in a billion hateful words uttered by hearts deceived. In every case, it appears to stand over the situation, jamming its conqueror's flag into the soil of the moment, claiming clear victory—as the wicked witch did over Aslan's body. But evil is ignorant. It has no idea what God is up to. It boasts of desolation and a deep history of success, but something deeper undoes it.

That's Christmas. Christmas is the deeper magic of God burning bright as a star right in Satan's eyes. What was the evil it undid? Brace yourself . . . *our ignorant and selfish rebellion*. From the dawn of time, we have chosen *self over others, power over grace, revenge over forgiveness, taking over giving*. We've had a deep-seated desire to serve ourselves. But a deeper magic—the self-giving Trinity, maker and master of all things, who gave himself for us—would be born into our world and take over time: past, present, and future.

Christmas is the celebration of a deeper magic. It's a time to rejoice in truth that soars far above our heads. It's a time to smile uncontrollably

at the unexpected providence of God. In the chess match for control over the hearts of men, Satan boasted of his every move. Then God showed up as a fleshy ball of dough, bleary-eyed, weak, and needy. Check mate. The deeper magic wins as Satan stares slack-jawed. Eternity saves time through an infant. What else can you do with that but raise your hands and say, “Hallelujah”?

4

Appearing in the Dark



It isn't a coincidence that Christ was born at night. Not all light comes through our corneas. There is another kind of light, a light of . . . *hope*. Christ in us is called “the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27). And Christ is also the light that shines in the darkness (John 1:5). Hope shines. And what better time for a light to shine than at night?

It's a hard concept to grasp, isn't it—that a person can be a light? Maybe that's because it isn't meant to be grasped; it's meant to be grown. Some truths are hard and thick as granite. They bear us up and keep us steady. But other truths are

seeds. They're meant to germinate, to stretch into a stem and lift their flowering head to the sun. This truth is like that. Christ as the light is Christmas greenery.

Imagine it. The night is dark and cold, air creeping in the folds of clothing as Joseph and Mary made their way to a small town. Caesar's decree for a census has swelled the town to its seams. Houses and inns are brimming. Streets are flooded with feet. Somehow, somewhere, Joseph and Mary find a stable. And there, amidst the heavy exhalations of cows and horses, amidst the pressing of hay under hooves, it would happen. In great pain, a light would dawn. But who would be able to see it?

Eventually, the whole world would see it, as the centuries rolled forward like boulders down a hill. People would stare at the story of Christ's birth and realize something more was happening than an infant pushing his head into a world of color and light. There was something . . . deeper.

Christmas is about the deeper light that takes focus to notice. And that deeper light is the God who gives himself away. Christ is, as the Nicene

Creed puts it, “Light of light, very God of very God.” And why did he come? “For God so loved the world . . .” The *love* of God—even for those who ignore him or curse his name—culminates in *giving*. And that gift is “Light of light.”

Follow me into this mystery. The light of the birth of Christ shines in gracious generosity; it glows because it gives. It sends a message to the whole world—chasing its own desires like a crazed dragonfly in the summer heat—that *others* are worth living for. Others are even worth *dying* for. But the Christ of Christmas shines brightest in the wonderful truth that other people are worth *God being born for*. How? Why? Because God made us like himself. We are his children.

If we take nothing else from the Christmas story, we take this: our world is darkened by selfishness. No light can come from those who stare at themselves. The darkness of that night so many years ago was a shadow of a deeper darkness. The light of God entered the world as self-giving grace. In that infant, God’s hands were opened wide for any and all who wanted to grasp them. Jesus Christ is an invitation to live a life too great for selfishness,

a life that seeks to give itself away for others. And the more we give, the brighter Christ burns in us.

This is why I've always loved singing "Silent Night" in a dark church, with all these hands holding amber candles. As we hold the light in our hands, together, we sing. And we sing not just *in* the dark but *through* the dark, out into the world that so desperately needs to have its chin lifted up, to have its focus taken off of itself, even for one day of the year.

Do you see? The Son of God was born on a dark night to give the light of self-giving to a selfish world. We stare at that infant each year and say, "Ah, yes, God. It's not about *me*." The light of God burns steadily through every season of our selfishness. But in this season, we pause intentionally to worship. The hope of God shines brightest in the darkest room. Creation, it turns out, is a room darker than any other. It needed a light. And the candle of God was lit on Christmas night.

5

The Donkey



Animals are a wonder because of their silence. They stand on the cusp of language, uttering with their eyes, whispering with their glances, beckoning with bending necks, fearing with folded ears. They have a wordless tongue. And in a strange sense, that's why we love them. Sincerity's home is silence.

And the donkey certainly seems sincere, doesn't it? A lowly beast to carry a lowly savior, a wordless worker to carry the Word for the world . . . The popular children's book *The Small One* portrays the donkey as a humble, self-sacrificing

friend to a little boy. Towards the end of the book, when it looks as if the donkey will have to give his life up to help the boy, a kind stranger (Joseph) offers to buy him. The story ends with Small One carrying Mary into the blue moonlight to Bethlehem, bearing her on his little back without a grumble. Sounds like sincerity to me.

In reality, we only know one thing about that donkey: he didn't speak. With his head nodding to his own shifting steps, he carried on in quiet. He bore the mother who bore the savior who bore the sins of the world. It seems fitting that a wordless animal would usher in the most beautiful Word the world would ever hear. It's as if the donkey's life were the great pause before the voice of God broke through Mary's womb beneath a burning star. Silence is the arena for speech; the donkey was the arena for the Word of God. On that long trek to Bethlehem, under the navy sky, silence carried speech.

Christmas is hardly ever a time we associate with silence. Silver bells and Christmas carols, sure. But silence? And yet Christmas came on the back of silence, on the rough-haired hide of a

donkey that would serve in secret. Christmas came to creatures who had trouble closing their mouths. The great irony is that the child of Christmas would eventually be described as a silent sheep who would not open his mouth (Isa. 53:7).

Why? Why would the Word for the world, who entered a silent night on a silent beast, not open his mouth when spoken against? Why not utter the truth, and perhaps even save himself through that? Why be like the donkey when he was more like the angel chorus of light, singing sweet salvation into the somber cities of men?

Maybe it was because, even all the way back on that first night of his life in the world, silence would still serve its purpose. It would still be the arena for speech, the pause before the utterance. And if that's how Christ came into the world, doesn't it make poetic sense for this echo at his exit? The pause, the silence, worn so well by a tired donkey, would come before the speech of resurrection. Jesus would go silent as a lamb before its shearers because the greatest thing he would even speak required a full breath, a full, back-from-the-depths-of-hell, born-of-water-and-

the-Spirit, serpent-head-crushing breath.

When you sing “Silent Night” this year, think of the donkey. He doesn’t get much credit for his silence, just as Christ doesn’t get much credit for not opening his mouth before a delirious mob. But silence makes way for great speech. The dark makes way for the light. The donkey makes way for a King, the mute makes way for the majestic. I am thankful for the silent donkey that gave Christ the pause he needed before God spoke the most potent Word in all of history. *That*, my friends, is why that silent night is a *holy* night.