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The Eve of the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ  
December 24, 2019

Isaiah 9:2-7  
Psalm 96  
Titus 2:11-14  
Luke 2:1-20

### **A Very Miraculous Christmas**

I find evening services like this a challenge, and only partly because my typical bedtime skews toward the earlier side of the night. The reason is more because I am a creature of routine. I do well with routine, and I do not do well without routine. A service at ten o'clock in the evening is not routine and it throws me off. I have a pretty good usual Sunday morning routine in which I prepare for the services of the day. I get my head on straight and focus on being prepared mentally, spiritually, and, frankly, physically, the last of which (well, all of which) involves coffee and then some more coffee. It may involve a lot of coffee, but it works, and it is followed down to the last detail.

A service at ten o'clock in the evening is disorienting. When am I supposed to get to the church? When do I look at the sermon for the last time? The light in the sacristy where we are vested is different, and even minor things like that make a difference. I eat the same thing every Sunday morning—oatmeal, at the Havertown Starbucks—but, for a late service, what am I supposed to eat for dinner? I don't want oatmeal. I don't really ever want oatmeal, but it's part of the routine, so it's what I do.

Christmas Eve breaks up the routine and it always has, ever since that first Christmas in Bethlehem. In every conceivable way, it does not follow routine. And what do you expect? At the nativity of Jesus, God breaks into the world that he created. He is the creator of the world that he then shows up in; it would be like an author dropping into the pages of his book. It would be a surprise. Not routine, to say the least.

The Jews were waiting for a Messiah and had been waiting for a long time, and Jesus wasn't the Messiah they were waiting for: born in an unexpected place, in an unexpected way, to an unexpected people, and then doing unexpected stuff. But it wasn't just them, and it isn't just them: we could say that everybody is waiting for a messiah of some kind or another, someone who is going to set things right, for themselves, for the world. The Gentiles were looking for a Messiah, too, even if they didn't put it in those terms, and Jesus didn't fit the bill. He wasn't powerful; he didn't even value being powerful. He wasn't an amazing teacher like Socrates or a persuasive orator like Cicero. He didn't fit into the categories they expected, that anybody expected. They had routines, and those routines were routines of thought too, and Jesus turned them upside down. G. K. Chesterton wrote, "The world after Jesus was the same as the world before Jesus, only upside-down." Well, no wonder it's disorienting, then. It started off disorienting. It ended disorienting, too, with Mary Magdalene confused in the garden on Easter Day, "they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they laid him" (John 20:13). Christmas isn't very routine, and it can throw us off. We may need more coffee.

We are coming to the end of a decade that has been pretty disruptive, in various ways. Maybe you're happy about it; maybe you're not. But one thing is for sure: if you started the 2010s thinking, "Things are fine, but I just wish there were more movies about the holidays," well, things have worked out quite well for you. By my quick estimate (just a back-of-the-napkin calculation), there are now

roughly one trillion holiday movies. One prominent made-for-TV movie channel shows holiday movies continuously starting at the end of October. As of 2017, these movies on that channel were enjoyed by 72 million Americans. It's hard to imagine that you could get 72 million Americans to agree on anything—I feel like you couldn't get 72 million Americans to agree that the sky is blue—but holiday movies, well, this is apparently the thing.

And why not? I have no problem with holiday movies, and I have no problem with people wanting to watch them and relax for a bit and escape into a nostalgic holiday memory, imagined or not. Life is hard enough as it is, and people deserve to take a break and holiday movies are a fairly innocuous way to do that. It beats many of the alternatives.

These movies follow a fairly straightforward narrative arc—routine, shall we say. The details may vary but they all end the same way: relationships are healed; normalcy is restored; families are affirmed. The protagonists realize the true meaning of the holidays, and it isn't whatever their disagreement has been; it is the importance of friends and family, and the twinkling lights fade on a scene of domestic warmth. There are no bad guys in holiday movies; just wrong guys, who generally realize the wrongness of their ways by the end, wrapped in red and green sweaters.

This is all well and good, and it is innocuous as these things go. I would only want to point out, however, that while these are good holiday movies, they are not Christmas movies, exactly. There is an actual Christmas story—we heard it tonight and will tomorrow morning—and it, for better or worse, isn't about the Hallmark affirmations. It is about God himself breaking into our world, a world he created, to disrupt our routines, to send his grace, to make clear, for all time, his love. It is not a love that is theoretical, not abstract, but an actual love, expressed in a physical way, forever. It can be a scary love maybe; it can be a disruptive love, perhaps; maybe it is one that is hard to see sometimes. But the point is that no matter what happens, no matter what the state of a particular life is, no matter who else loves you or doesn't love you, or whom you love, or whatever the world is like: nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ, all year long.

This is important, because not everybody has Hallmark, made-for-TV holidays. We never have, and the point is that even if your holidays do not follow the cinematic narrative arc, conflict—resolution—reconciliation, with everyone realizing “the true meaning of Christmas,” Christmas isn't only still for you, which it is, it is *especially* for you. Further, what is true on Christmas Day is true of every other day as well. What the incarnation shows us, what the baby Jesus shows us, is that nothing can keep God from us. And, if we can't go to God, God will come to us. God takes the initiative; God gives the gift. Everything is grace. Ain't no mountain enough, ain't no valley low enough, ain't no river wide enough, to keep God from getting to us.

In the interest of fairness, I should mention that there is one exception to this holiday movie situation: the Charlie Brown Christmas movie. Do you remember? Charlie Brown is being Charlie Brown-ish about the holidays; Lucy suggests they do a Christmas play; it doesn't go well. Charlie Brown goes to get a real tree (not a pink aluminum one); that doesn't go well either. “Does anybody know what Christmas is really about?” Charlie Brown asks. Linus says he does, walks to center stage: in the language of the King James Bible, he recites the angel's announcement to the shepherds: “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.” *Unto you*: you didn't earn it, you didn't deserve it, you didn't have to. Unto you God has come; keeping his promise to David. He is the Messiah who saves you; he is the Lord who loves you.

Then the scraggly tree becomes a magnificent tree, in a way that is nothing less than, well, miraculous. God took what was inferior and made it superior. Ain't no mountain high enough; ain't no Lucy cynical enough. This is what we require; this is what God brings. Not a domestic reconciliation that we effect if we try hard enough. God breaking into the world in a way that is miraculous, transformative, not routine.

That first Christmas was disorienting for everyone. The shepherds were woken up in the middle of the night; let's not even talk about how disruptive it was for Mary and Joseph. It would be an entire life of disruption and its disruptions continue still.

In the midst of all of the world's disruptions today, the disorientation, the confusion, the happy holiday moments and the more challenging days, the celebrations of life and the mourning of loss, in the thick of the world as it is: in all of that, remember the child in the manger, God with us and for us, who would give his entire life out of his inexhaustible love. No matter what. God loves you, no matter what. Merry Christmas.