

Christmas

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Typeset December 25, 2018

Exordium

This has always been a festive time, it seems.

The Romans celebrated Saturnalia at this time,
and shook up the regular order of things.

They made sacrifices to their god Saturn.

The old Norse and Germanic peoples celebrated Yule,
originally connected to their god Odin.

Today western societies celebrate Christmas,
from the Macy's thanksgiving parade
on up to the college bowl games around the new year.

It may have the word "Christ" in its name,
but Christmas is not necessarily Christian.

The holiday still has some Saturn and Odin in it,
plus whatever other gods people may follow today.

This isn't some problem for us to solve.

I'm not upset by it, and don't want you to be upset.
The fact is: what many call "Christmas" is mostly secular.

But the Christian strategy has borne fruit.

There are reminders everywhere of the birth of Christ.

It may be the one time each year for some
when they hear of God's love for them in Christ.

Is this really the date that Jesus was born?

Impossible to say, especially on *our* calendar.
(Nobody back then reckoned dates the way we do now.)

But with the Christians who first celebrated this holy day,

we'd have to say the exact date doesn't matter.
They were giving the world something better than paganism:
better than Saturnalia or Yule,
because when Jesus was born,
the true God was entering his Creation.

We're here to celebrate something more precious than
friendship,
more beneficial than generosity,
and far more joyous than a break from work or school.

So let us ponder in wonder at the meaning,
for we know the purpose: our salvation.

Therefore, let us now rise and sing our Exordium hymn,
number 142, "Rejoice, Rejoice This Happy Morn."

John 1:1–14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word
was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the
beginning with God. All things were made through
Him, and without Him nothing was made that was
made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of
men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the
darkness did not comprehend it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was
John. This man came for a witness, to bear witness
of the Light, that all through him might believe. He
was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of
that Light. That was the true Light which gives light
to every man coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world was made
through Him, and the world did not know Him. He
came to His own, and His own did not receive Him.
But as many as received Him, to them He gave the
right to become children of God, to those who believe
in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the
will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,

and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

“For unto us a Child is born,
Unto us a Son is given;
And the government will be upon His shoulder.
And His name will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

Seven hundred years before Christ lived Isaiah the prophet.
As a prophet, he wrote about things to come.

The words “For unto us a Child is born” refer to Jesus.

Here Isaiah gives Him these divine names:

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah pinpoints the meaning with these names.

There have been many teachers since
who deny Jesus as the divine Savior in human flesh.

They disagree with Isaiah, Moses, and other prophets,
as well as the apostles and Jesus himself.

One was Cerinthus. He taught that Jesus is not the Christ,
but that Christ was a separate divine being.

He said the Christ joined with Jesus,
but Jesus’ birth was ordinary, and He was just a man.

Around the time Cerinthus lived, the apostle John wrote (1 John 4:2),

“By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.”

John agrees that Christmas is an important holiday,
but only if we celebrate that Jesus came in the flesh.

This was a hard teaching for many of the Jewish people,

who were looking for a different kind of Messiah.

Therefore our epistle lesson goes into great detail.

Hebrews contains chapter after chapter
showing reasons it had to be so.

The holy writer speaks of Jesus, saying,

“... being the brightness of [God’s] glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high...” (Heb. 1:3)

Jesus is a person like you and I are all persons.

Like us, He was conceived and born.

He has a body and soul, a mind and a will.

But unlike us, this person existed before all that.

He existed as one with God the Father before time,
and through Him everything has been made.

Now, keeping his human nature intact,

He has ascended to receive the power that is His,
and reigns with the Father over all things.

This is how Paul put it in writing to the Philippians:

Though he was by nature God, he did not consider equality with God as a prize to be displayed, but he emptied himself by taking the nature of a servant. When he was born in human likeness, and his appearance was like that of any other man, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Phil. 2:6–8, EHV

There have been teachers who contradict this teaching,
but there have been many more who don’t care about it.

Why *should* we care, if it doesn’t change our lives now?

Can’t Christmas just be a nice pause of the daily churn?

It’s good to lay your burdens down for a little while, right?

Why ruin it by talking so much about how people are wrong?

Maybe you don’t disregard the divinity of Jesus,

but I bet you have neighbors who do.

And there's a part in all of us that just longs for a holiday,
not so that we can remember anything, but just to rest.

Life is life. People are people.

Why make such a stink about the truth today?

It's like John wrote in today's text,

He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name. . .

The world didn't know Him,
because the world is too busy with its own business.

For some it's being caught up in the daily churn.
For some the dissatisfying search for peace and rest.

But under all, it's the sin we carry within us,
the wrongness that separates us from our Maker.

Just as God broke into this fallen world
to be born behind enemy lines,

He also must break into our hearts with His Word,
and be born in us today.

You see, the sinfulness you and I have
makes *us* enemies of God.

Not only does it cause us harm and grief,
but it makes us slaves of death and Satan.

The selfish lust for gifts and other stuff.
Using other people for our own gain.
Disregard for the woes of others.

You show your sinfulness in thousands of ways.
But you *see* it only when God opens your eyes.

As slaves to sin, we seek some solace from suffering,
but there is none outside our Savior.

Only when you become a child of God,
do you find the rest you really need.

Then the true holiday (holy day) begins,
a day that will mature into paradise without end.

God grants the right to be His children, as John wrote,
“to those who believe in His name.”

(Really many divine names, as Isaiah teaches us)

The holy name reveals the person and work of Jesus.

But it’s not a magic word.

Even if you know what Jesus’ name sounds like,
and even if you repeat it, “Lord, Lord. . .”

it does you no good without faith in what it means.

Faith is made true by the truth of what it trusts.

Faith’s power comes only from its object:

the holy name of Jesus.

Immanuel, “God with us”

Jesus, for He saves His people from their sins:

the most precious thing on your lips,

and the most powerful word in your ears

because of what it *means*.

For Jesus lived on Earth as you cannot:

He desired only the will of God.

He didn’t use others, but gave Himself for us all.

He had compassion even for sinners,

even for us who suffer by our own foolishness.

And that perfect life was what He gave for you,

doing away with every trace of your guilt forever.

You know the reason His birth is worth celebrating!

So let the world have its secular Christmas,

its Saturnalia or pagan Yule.

We live because of God-made-flesh, Immanuel,

the One who made us, and became our brother,

the One who experienced this daily churn,

so that He could provide forgiveness to all.

He’s the source of our true peace every day.

He’s the source of our true rest every night.

For you are already forgiven,

and believing that, you are counted as sons of God.

If sons, then heirs of God with Christ.

Your inheritance is every blessing Jesus deserved,
because He was born to be *your* Savior.

In Jesus, your life is filled with holidays (holy days),
because in God's sight, yours is now a holy life.

O Jesus Christ, Thy manger is
My paradise at which my soul reclineth.
For there, O Lord, Doth lie the Word
Made flesh for us– herein Thy grace forth shineth.

Thou Christian heart, Whoe'er thou art,
Be of good cheer and let no sorrow move thee.
For God's own Child, In mercy mild,
Joins thee to Him– how greatly God must love thee!
(ELH 161 vs. 1, 4)

Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria