

Sunday, December 7, 2008

About Christmas

Think of your current age. Now add 33 to it. Now imagine that you were suddenly shipped off to Mugabe's Zimbabwe, or a refugee camp in Somalia, and you couldn't get back until you reached that age 33 years in the future. It's a fearsome prospect, as those are truly dreadful places. 33 years of danger, filth, suffering of every kind, and the utter despair of knowing that you weren't going to get away from it any time soon. How horrible. You'd almost wish you could contract something fatal. But you can't.

We really aren't able to imagine heaven, never having seen anything like it to compare it to, but there are some details available for us. For one thing, because it's where God has his throne, we know it's absolutely perfect, just because He's there and He wouldn't have it any other way. It's full of light, and glory, and creatures beyond even the imagination of Spielberg. Every tear will be wiped away, provided you can find anything to mourn, and there is no need of money. We are told to come buy milk and wine without cost, and gold is so ordinary it's used to make paving stones. For those of us in a nation diving headfirst into financial catastrophe, that sounds pretty good! Every need will be met. Sin will be gone, and we'll be surprised, once it's no longer around, just how steeped in it we were without even recognizing most of it. The broken, fallen world will be healed, and disease and distress and dysfunction will likely be things of the past. But the best part is that God and Jesus and all His people will be home there--together forever. It's like a fairy tale, except better, because it's *real*.

The most miraculous thing about the account of the first Christmas is the back-story which we generally fail to consider. Jesus was in heaven--it was His rightful home, and He agreed, as per the plan from ages past, to leave it for those 33 years. He left perfection, power, and glory, and *voluntarily* came down here to experience the life that all of us pathetic humans live. Jesus willingly "emptied Himself" of His Godly attributes--no more omniscience, omnipresence, or the other incomprehensible omnis. God became, in other words, one of us.

Jesus left paradise and, after what may have been the first recorded case of artificial insemination, entered this mortal coil as an infant. He went through the trauma of birth. He cried, He pooped, He may even (poor Mary!) have had colic. He probably experienced all the usual childhood ailments, growing pains, and skinned knees. After infinity past in the perfection of heaven, Jesus endured this place full of thorns, droughts, famines, splinters, and rocks in the fields, fleas, flatulence, smelly feet, and zits. What a horror show this is, this cesspool of humanity.

It begs the question: why would God come to earth under those conditions? The answer is provided by Jesus Himself--because He loves us. Which also leads to the next logical question: why does He love us? We're hopelessly screwed up, every last one of us. But love us God does, for His own doubtlessly good reasons, even though it makes no sense at all to us. He loves us with an enduring, consistent, and undeserved love that is beyond

our ability to understand, but not, with His help, beyond our ability to accept. And apparently the best way to get us out of this mess was to become a human, so God did.

And human He was. Jesus was accused of being a glutton and a wine-bibber. He hung out with the scum of society and His own clueless band of homeys. We know He wept, and I'll betcha He laughed. He was a man of deep compassion and inevitable truthfulness, and folks of every station were irresistibly attracted to Him, although of course far more of them were not. In one form or another, He went through every disaster we do, or at least its first century equivalent, but unlike us, he did it without sinning against God or Man. Jesus had to be human. Only then could He plumb the depths of the human experience, and only then could He rightly represent us in both life and death. Only then could He die.

Every year the television schedule is crowded with holiday specials this time of year, each of them claiming to be about someone who discovers the True Meaning of Christmas. Frankly, they make me want to gag. They're all very good entertainment, and full of problematic events where people learn lessons about sharing and sacrificing, that yes there really is a Santa Claus, the most important thing in life is love, and miracles happen at the rate of about one every thirty minutes. We all get melty and sentimental. This is not a bad thing. It's just incorrect.

Because the True Meaning of Christmas...is Easter. The baby we adore on Christmas went to His death 33 years later, and He did it for us. He did it knowing the torture and physical agony that was involved, because He knew it was the only way to restore His beloved human race to Himself. It wasn't pretty. In fact, it was nauseatingly ugly--as far from a Christmas card as you can get. But it was all for us, and if we believe that He was who He said He was and ask for His death to pay for our sins, then they are wiped away. Our record is clean, and we get to experience heaven after we too go through death. Just because He loves us. He shall see the results of His agony, and be satisfied.

And do you know what I think? That think that calls for a *party!!!* Ring bells! Sing songs! Give presents! Give them to those we know and love, and to those we will never even meet, through wonderful agencies like World Relief and Compassion and Samaritan's Purse. They will be happy to turn your hard-earned dollars into goats, chickens, seeds, and other life-giving gifts, to make things just a little bit (or maybe a big bit) easier for some other sufferer in the world. Joy to the world! Because He loves us, and wants us, and did what it took to bring us to Himself. Hallelujah.