

"Christmas Jesus"

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In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. (Luke 2:1-18)

I have to confess that "I like Christmas Jesus best." It may seem odd to you, that I would begin a Christmas Eve meditation by citing "Talladega Nights" as spiritual authority, but I am drawn to this particular doctrine of the Gospel According to Ricky Bobby. I may never have begun a table prayer with an address to "8-pound, 6-ounce, newborn infant Jesus," in his "golden-fleece diapers," but on this holy night, I would say that is the Jesus who is most on our minds, and even in our prayers. So, while some may pray "to grownup Jesus or teenage Jesus or bearded Jesus, or whoever you want," I, too, like the Christmas Jesus best.

The Christmas Jesus is easy to find in Luke's account of the birth. It is a story of "great joy," infused with warmth and light. The words paint a scene of peace and calm. It is a story that instills in us a sense of childlike wonder and amazement. In this story, we are reminded that we do not need to be afraid.

And yet, we know that Luke left out some details. The words "*the time came for her to deliver her child*" hardly cover what is really involved in giving birth to a baby. Sleeping next to cows is not always calm and peaceful. Not all hay in a stable full of animals is dry and clean. And as we read about the annunciation of the good news to the shepherds, we try to keep our imaginations fixed on the warm light and glory — and try our best to forget the abject terror wrought by the appearance of a multitude of fiery, heavenly seraphs.

The truth is, it can be hard to hold on to the Christmas Jesus, knowing what we know. That seems to have been the idea that T.S. Eliot had, when he wrote a different kind of account of what

the wise men experienced on their pilgrimage to pay homage to the baby Jesus in Bethlehem. Eliot's poem "The Journey of the Magi" begins with these words:

*A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'
And the camels galled, sorefooted, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow. ...
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
and running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly."¹*

Eliot observes, rightly and honestly, that finding Jesus is not always easy. We can have a hard time of it.

That is why my sense of this night is captured most fully by artists like Rembrandt, who tended to include a more complete vision of what really went on. A good example is "The Adoration of the Shepherds," a Renaissance work painted by a student of Rembrandt that hangs in the National Gallery in London. It shows a scene in the stable that is jumbled and crowded. A seated Mary and Joseph are surrounded by an odd assortment of people. Two peasant women stand directly over them, holding up a little child so she can see the manger. Two shepherds are kneeling in the foreground, but five others are milling about in the shadows behind them. A little boy plays with a scraggly dog just a few yards from the manger. Above them all, in the wooden frame of the stable rafters, the shape of a cross already looms like a prophecy over the manger.

Even so, the artist leaves no question about what is most important in the scene. There are only two sources of light in the painting. The first is a small lantern held by the shepherds, but it is completely overwhelmed by the much greater light emanating from the manger. The light of Christ dominates the scene, casting illumination upon all the details — the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, the mundane and the holy. Our eyes, as they fall upon the painting, are instantly drawn to that light. Even when we glance away at some other part of the scene, we are quickly drawn back to that tiny baby, who quietly, innocently, commands it all.

This, I believe, is the true beauty of Christmas. On this night, we cannot turn our faces from the light. Even if we have been out in the cold, even if we have had a hard time of it on our journey to the manger, for the moment it becomes all too easy to fix our gaze on the Power that comes as Innocence, on the Hope that does not seem like folly, on the Love that overwhelms hate, on the Light that cannot be overcome by darkness. These are the realities that we cannot deny in the birth of Jesus, things that will never change in him, even as the full weight of the world

¹ T.S. Eliot, "The Journey of the Magi," <https://www.buildfaith.org/the-journey-of-the-magi/#gref>.

contends against them, even as he gives himself completely to them, even as he is crucified because of them. Through it all, Jesus never loses his Innocence. He never gives up on Hope. His Power prevails even over death. His Love never wavers, and his Light is never overcome.

At Christmas, God makes all these professions readily accessible to us. In the manger, they are all so easy to see, so easy to believe. They take hold of us so easily. Holding onto them, well, that will be another matter. That will be a colder journey, with night-fires going out, with lack of shelters, cities hostile and towns unfriendly, with villages dirty and charging high prices. We may have a hard time of it, holding on.

But not tonight. The world can pray to whatever it wants, but tonight — especially tonight — I like Christmas Jesus best.

Amen.