

Luke 2:1-14

Christmas 2015

Everything is larger from the inside

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Why is this night different from all other nights? Besides the fact this is likely the only time that people in Maryland have ever shown up in shorts and tank tops and will have outdoor cookouts for Christmas dinner? That's actually an unwelcome, but helpful reminder that Christmas is not about jingle bells and snow. On this night, different from all other nights, people gather in every nation of the world. They meet in small cinderblock buildings with thatched roofs and in gothic cathedrals whose vast space is filled with the squirming children and sleepy grandparents. Some arrive by way of habit or nostalgia, unbelieving but mildly interested in the drama of it all. They will be seated next to the one who has come silently with a heavy heart, fresh from a broken marriage, desperately seeking some comfort; no drama, only a small measure of peace from above. He will be seated next the woman mourning her husband, and next to her will be the lonely soldier, just glad to be alive and home. In nearly every language, we gather to sing, to hear the sacred story, to break bread together and remember once more what matters most. There are places where people gather under threat of persecution or even death, much like the original holy family. These are the ones who teach us to believe. They are not mildly interested in religious drama or nostalgia. They know that everything in their lives is at stake in believing what we proclaim this night.

Why, then, is this night different from all other nights? On this night, we recall that into this world, wracked with pain and sorrow, violence and mayhem, God, the Creator of the Stars of night, the people's everlasting light, chose to come to us, descend to us in love. On the one hand, this is utterly implausible. It makes about as much sense as love does in a world of hatred and fear. How could one possibly believe in something as preposterous as compassion for the wounded, mercy for the fallen and kindness toward the weak? Shouldn't we guard ourselves against such nonsense?

On the other hand, as dawn breaks across the world, people will recall that God chose to be near weak, wounded and fallen humanity. What's more God chose, in Jesus, to be one of us in the most ordinary way possible, which is what makes it all so extraordinary. If you seek to comprehend this you will fail. It can only be perceived by faith and received as the gift that it is. Once you dare to perceive the coming of God in the Jewish flesh of Jesus than the ordinary becomes extraordinary. In a world nearly consumed by violence, hatred and fear of the stranger, love, compassion, mercy and kindness make sense at all. What makes sense in the logic of this world is violence for violence, hatred for hatred, fear for fear. We see this happening now and it's not really new. It's the sad way of the world; a way that breaks the heart of God.

Yet, the astonishing news is that love conquers fear, compassion heals the wounded, mercy lifts the fallen. This is Christmas. To the believing heart, one perceives the ground of all

love, compassion, kindness and mercy in God who came to save us from all that destroys us.

In the final scene of C.S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia, all of the characters, minus one, are gathered in a stable. The stable from the outside appears to be dingy and narrow. It's a fearful place of darkness and certain death at the hands of a ruthless tyrant. But when the great King Tirian, who serves Aslan, arrives and walks into the stable, it is transformed. "The Stable seen from within and stable seen from without are two different places" he says. From without it appears as a stable only, but it's actually a doorway into the new creation where Aslan awaits after the fall of Narnia. Lucy adds, 'In our world too, a Stable once had something inside it that was bigger than our whole world.' Our perception of Christ in the manger is what makes all the difference in how we live in this world. From within this Stable, where the manger holds Christ, we see far more than meets the eye. We see God in flesh bringing joy to human hearts.

Gazing upon the stable where the vulnerable Jesus is born surrounded by barnyard animals, poor shepherds, Mary and Joseph, we see in Christ the whole of God's astonishing mercy for humanity. It is all there wrapped in swaddling clothes. Seeing from the inside, everything in life is enlarged.

The story we recall on Christmas provides an occasion to see from within the stable. One can of course refuse to see in the stable the love that continues to hold the world, the mercy that lifts the fallen and the kindness that heals the wounded. But that refusal only makes the world more dingy and diminished. It reduces everything to the smallest dimension; the dimension without God and therefore without hope.

When you dare to look upon love in this stable with the eyes of faith, nothing can ever be reduced; everything is made larger. Here you see, is God-in-the-flesh given for us, and all creation.

*It's the festival of the incarnation. Rejoice!*