

December 25, 2013, Christmas Day: John 1:1-14; Hebrews 1:1-4

December 12, 2013

John's Christmas story contains no scary angels or shaking shepherds, no Magi bearing gifts, no star guiding their way. There's no Mary or Joseph, no lowing cattle or humble manger. There's not even a baby Jesus. For John, Christmas begins all the way back at the beginning itself. "In the beginning was the Word," John declares, intentionally echoing the first syllables of creation. Then, "Let there be light!" he says, and names the light as Jesus, who comes into the world "so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in darkness" (John 12:46).

John's imagery of light overcoming darkness is one of the reasons the ancient church (located in the Northern Hemisphere) placed Advent and Christmas at the winter solstice. It provided preachers with sermon illustrations straight from nature. Commemorating Christmas during the darkest days of the year underscored sinful humanity's desperate need for light and salvation. Yet because the winter solstice also marked the reemergence of daylight, Christmas signaled light's eventual triumph: an advent of palpable hope.

This imagery of light overcoming darkness is also why lights endure as decorations during Christmas, even though the link between Jesus and light has receded into the background for most people. Not that some don't make comical attempts at preserving the link. In our neighborhood, one family set up a big plastic nativity scene in their front yard each Christmas, complete with a bright plastic baby Jesus. The only problem was that they lit up the baby Jesus with a blinking bulb. One moment Jesus was light for the world, the next moment he wasn't.

I was in Southern California one Christmas and visited a church devoted to a feel-better gospel, accentuating the positive for the sake of personal happiness—not a hard thing to do when it's 70 degrees and sunny every day. A positive attitude pervaded everything at this church, from the smiling ushers and greeters to the workers manicuring the lawn to the various sculptures of Jesus that dot the campus. These sculptures, each depicting a giddy Jesus in various biblical scenarios, caught my attention. I grew up an austere Congregationalist and wasn't used to seeing Jesus smile so much. One had Jesus merrily strolling across water (a placid fake pond

with lily pads and goldfish). The biblical story included a furious storm on open sea and terrified disciples. But who knows, maybe his disciples' misplaced fear made Jesus laugh.

Another sculpture had a smiling baby Jesus in Mary's arms, which made perfect sense until I read the sculpture's title: *Flight into Egypt*. Outwitted by the Magi, who slipped away without informing King Herod of Jesus' whereabouts, Herod retaliated by killing all the male infants in Bethlehem and the surrounding vicinity. You'd think the artist would have sculpted a terrified Mary ferociously guarding the baby Jesus in her haste to escape. Instead, the sculptor portrayed Mary in a cheery mood. But that wasn't the weirdest part. The weirdest part was that baby Jesus was metallic. His face and skin were glistening chrome.

What to make of a shiny metal baby Jesus? When I inquired, I was told that the metallic design was inspired by Jesus as Light for the world. The finish not only allowed the California sun to brightly bounce off of Jesus (the light part), it also allowed viewers the opportunity to see their own faces reflected (the world part). (Nobody was sure why the sculptor chose the flight to Egypt scenario.) The idea was to remind everyone that Jesus loves them as they are. As for me, metal baby Jesus gave me the creeps.

Jesus can give people the creeps—or at least sufficient cause to creep away. “The light has come into the world,” he said later in John, “but people loved darkness more than the light.” Nobody wants their dark stuff exposed. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it: Christ's coming was not merely a matter of glad tidings, but first of all, “frightening news for everyone who has a conscience.”

The light that descended on Bethlehem does not make light of sin or look on the bright side. God's love is not the easy sympathy of a Santa Claus God, but a burning fire whose light chases away every shadow, floods every corner and turns midnight to noon. This love reveals sin and overcomes it. Bonhoeffer compared it to a prison cell “in which one waits and hopes and does various unessential things . . . but is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened from the outside.”

God's coming to Earth in Christ is always framed in terms of rescue. The Christmas story boldly proclaims it without any qualifiers: “Today is born to you a Savior who is Christ the Lord.” The goal of Christmas rescue is light overcoming darkness just like at creation, only now we call it a new creation, as our darkness is overcome by the

bright likeness of Jesus himself. As Hebrews put it, Jesus “is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being.” Rather than see ourselves reflected in a metal baby Jesus, we hope that others will see Jesus reflected in us.