

Christmas is the shortest season in the Church Year. At its most, it lasts three weeks, but usually it's over in two. Enough time to tell the story of the shepherds in Luke and read John's Prologue. If we have a third week, we might read about twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple, or the visit of the Magi, or the Flight into Egypt. These stories are the stories the Church tells, but the Christmas story is bigger than the Church: it's a cultural declaration of universal celebration: bringing the outdoors in and decorating a tree, hanging lights on the roof like little stars, the magic of Drosselmeyer and the Nutcracker, choral concerts, revels, family gatherings, holiday letters, emotions and memories of loved ones gone and times long past.

Celebration is never simple, however. It is always punctuated by grief. We miss the parents, spouses, and friends whose bad jokes and endearments livened Christmas dinner. When the weather turns dark, people fall and get sick, family ties snap, despair jabs into the heart of happiness. (Or as Simeon said to Mary, "And a sword shall pierce you also.") During the years I tried, and failed, to conceive a child, Christmas, once my favorite time of year, became a season of terrible emptiness.

What I didn't know then, but do know now, is that Christmas is not just a time of great joy, it is also a time of great peril. Think about Mary, unmarried and pregnant, traveling all by herself to the Hill Country to visit Elizabeth. Think about John the Baptist in the wilderness, Joseph, caught in such fear and shame that it required an angel to talk him out of it, his and Mary's journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, birth in a cave or a stable, the later flight to Egypt along roads littered with bandits and

soldiers. The joys of Christmas happen not in some distant forest amid the trills and whistles of birds, but at the heart of empire and the world's depravity. It's not a guaranteed happy ending. It calls for everything we've got.

Christmas is love come to earth in the form of a child. Births are always perilous. The encounter with a new and tiny life who's both totally helpless and full of possibility, wondering what that person will become. It's a very universal moment: all of us, even if we have not given birth, have received birth, and as I said in a book of Lectionary Reflections I wrote some years ago, everyone is an Expert in Babies.

That said, babies also ask us to imagine something totally new.

The birth of Jesus comes to all who received him, who believed in his name, and gave them the power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

We are all of us children of God.

Most of us don't know that. Or rather, we do know. We just don't believe it could possibly be true.

One of the problems is that despite the wonderful chorus of "Joy to the World, where heaven and nature sing," our history has tragically separated God from Nature. People are amazed that God came to earth in the form of a tiny baby. I've heard preacher's voices grow loud and shrill. A baby. A helpless baby. A poor helpless baby. Imagine that.

To which I say: how else would God come? Who but God created babies and birth? Who created winter storms and rainbows? Who gave us the moon and sun, scorpions, mushrooms and oak trees? How can God be fully human without beginning as a baby?

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.

At this time of year, we stand, feeling overwhelmed by darkness and look for the light.

There's also a better translation. The one we read suggests that light and darkness are in opposition, that the dark wants to engulf the light, but cannot. The Greek verb *katalambano* means "to grasp or seize, to lay hold of, to get" either physically, as in I grasp my handbag, or mentally, as in I get what you're saying. Light is ungraspable. So is darkness. That's why I like the King James translation better: "And the light shineth in the darkness and the darkness comprehendeth it not."

Darkness, say the wise ones, is not evil, it's ignorance. It's being blinded so completely by my own light that I cannot see any other light, even the light of God. When I am ignorant, I fail to understand how light and darkness need one another. When I can dim my own light I see the lights shining from those around me. Disagreement turns into nuance.

True love dissolves the opposition between patient and caregiver, because in true love we are always both. The fact that caregiving can be so difficult has more to do with the dynamics of power than it does about care. In the world of power, when I

am a caregiver, the patient holds my time hostage. The kingdom of God is not a kingdom of servant hostages. It is a world in which all participate. It is a world in which every voice is heard, every face is real. Every act, an act of love.

Struggle, domination, submission, hierarchy: all these are obstacles to love. Love must be free.

It reminds me that in 16th century England, a woman could be imprisoned for failing to obey her husband. Where's the love in that?

Which gets me to the second misunderstanding in today's readings: Paul writes to the Christians in Galatia: *Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law.* Imprisoned? Are the Ten Commandments a jail cell?

Yes, the birth of the Christ Child was the gift of something new, just as all births are, but the new does not arrive to negate the old. Like light and darkness, the new helps us to better comprehend the old. Jesus does not negate the law. His life shows us why we need it.

And what does Paul mean by "faith?" Again, translation can be misleading. Faith, to us Americans, implies belief. We are taught to believe in what we cannot see. We are taught to believe what the Church teaches. Faith means you don't ask questions. When I can't ask questions, isn't that a form of imprisonment?

It reminds me of the constant conversations I had with my Buddhist friends. They were almost all of them former Christians, emphasis upon the former. They would speak of the relief they felt when they finally lay all that church stuff aside and

embraced Buddha's higher truths. While I was delighted that they found what they were looking for, I also suggested, very gently, that one can never really repudiate what one has been, one can only transform it, that their Buddhist practice sprang from Christian roots and that was good reason to love those roots even if I'd moved on. The same is true for me. My decade of Buddhist practice has given me a far more expansive understanding of Jesus. When I could, at last, throw off the hard and metallic breastplate of righteousness and enforced obedience, I discovered a vulnerability within me which was very sweet, but which, as a woman, had been all but impossible to express in a patriarchal society.

I remembered that when I applied to seminary I was warned that priests tend to have a "Messianic complex." When I studied Buddhism, I discovered the ordinary Bodhisattva vow of working to relieve the suffering of all beings. We are put on earth to save one another. We are put on earth to love one another. We are put on earth to be fully human as Jesus was fully human. This is not a "Messianic complex." It is the walk of a lifetime.

The law was never a prison. It was the rules a loving parent gave to a beloved child so that they might grow to maturity.

Christmas celebrates the birth of love in the time of darkness.

When Christmas morning arrives, somehow that love shines through, no matter what went on before. The family argument stops. The sun comes out. Great drops of dew sparkle like diamonds upon the bare branches of the trees. We don't

need electric lights to light the morning. We relax, tell stories, listen to music and savor the softness of love. In 1914, enemy soldiers came together in No Man's Land to share stories, cigarettes, bury their dead and sing Christmas carols.

Every year, we are given the chance to glimpse the love that came down at Christmas. Christmas never ends. Like the baby, it only grows. Keep rocking the Christ Child in your arms. It's time to start building his world. Amen.