

Randall Munroe, who draws the Web cartoon “XKCD,” points out that “All our Christmas stories now are about discovering the ‘true meaning of Christmas.’ At some point, that quest itself *became* the true meaning.”* And it’s true, aside from 1965’s “A Charlie Brown Christmas,” I don’t know of any commercial mainstream Christmas entertainment that even refers to the Biblical Christmas story.

Commercial filmmakers may attempt to find Christmas’s special meaning in family togetherness, but that’s just as much part of Thanksgiving, or the Fourth of July for that matter. And not everyone can celebrate Christmas with their family, or wants to. As much drama, nostalgia, and comedy as there is to be mined from shopping, travel, decorations, and food preparation, and for all its fascination, the secular world just doesn’t have much substance to offer in the stories it tells about Christmas. The pseudo-profound search for the “true meaning” of Christmas that is ultimately a self-referential snipe hunt is the best the secular world can do.

Only God can transcend the cycles of this world. Only God can give real meaning to Christmas, which makes sense, since God is the cause of Christmas in the first place. And yes, I’ve heard the story that Christmas is really just a pagan holiday that the Church co-opted, but if you try to nail down the details of just when and where that happened, a funny thing happens. All you can find are stories citing... other stories, not historical facts. Another instance of the secular world running in circles.

Much older than the “pagan holiday” story is the belief that Jesus came into the world on the same date he left it. And this is an opportune time to remind you that strictly speaking, Christmas is not the celebration of the incarnation of Jesus, but rather the celebration of his birth, his nativity. Jesus became incarnate at the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel asked Mary to bear him, and she conceived by the Holy Spirit. And the Church has since very ancient times celebrated the Annunciation on March 25, right around the time she also commemorates the Crucifixion, and exactly nine months before Christmas. So Christmas is deeply referential, but not self-referential.

Christmas refers back to Mary’s faithfulness, and further back to God’s promises to free the world from sin, and further still to the introduction of sin, and further still, to God’s sublime all-powerful love which called the world into being — through Christ. And of course, Christmas must also refer to the future, to the death that must follow every birth, to the resurrection that liberates us from death, to the growth of the community of the resurrection, the church, by the proclamation of this good news, and finally all the way forward to Christ’s return to reign for ever and ever, hallelujah.

Christmas’s references beyond itself are appropriate for the birth of a humble savior, the act of God’s utmost humility. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “Who among us will celebrate Christmas correctly? Whoever finally lays down all power, all honor, all reputation, all vanity, all arrogance, all individualism beside the manger; whoever remains lowly and lets God alone be high; whoever looks at the child in the manger and sees the glory of God precisely in his lowliness.”

So although Christmas points away from itself, we cannot look away, because as surely as a helpless baby nevertheless manages to take over an entire house, Christmas promises such profound change that to know the truth of Christmas is to be enraptured at what God is doing.

We do well to reflect on how earthly power in the form of mighty armies, dazzling rulers, and vast fortunes might seem no match for an infant born to a poor family improvising far from home, but which has had more of an impact? Conquests are made and lost, rulers and empires rise and fall, fortunes are amassed squandered, all secular cycles spin themselves out, but the enduring place of Christmas is assured. Even atheists decorate, feast, and exchange gifts. For the power of Christmas is the humble power of Christ, who needs no reassurance, no pomp, no help in ruling that which was always his own. He is pure, intimate, love, and that is more than enough.

The unique power of Christmas is as intimate as the embrace of humanity by divinity, as emotionally riveting as any birth. Our hearts draw us back to the majesty of God born to the humble Holy Family, the earthy miracle of birth. And what a privilege God offers us there.

Once I was invited to give a blessing to a newborn baby before she was baptized. Her parents and her grandmother and her three-year-old sister were there in the living room. And I wanted to be sure to include her sister, since I could empathize with how a new baby can draw all the attention away from an older sibling. But she couldn't read, and probably couldn't understand the words, much less the concepts.

So instead I asked her to watch me give the blessing, and then to follow my example and give her own blessing by making the sign of the cross on her baby sister's forehead. And she did. And I could see in her eyes, and the way her whole body reacted, that she got it. And the privilege of that moment took me back to when I was four and my parents finally let me hold my baby brother for the first time. And there was no jealousy, just a sense of privilege and a love that transcends understanding, a love that silently promises to endure.

We all have different experiences, but there's only one love, and it comes from God, through Jesus. Whatever we think or feel, whether we have children or siblings or not, whatever our journey through life has been like, all Christians can share in the experience of greeting the newborn Jesus, wondering at how his humble birth sanctifies the universe, experiencing the love he brings into the world, love beyond words. And so we give our hearts to Jesus anew.

But not only our hearts, and not only our minds, for where they go, so our whole beings must follow. And so we can't say we observe Christmas unless Christ is born in our hearts, and we act accordingly, following his example. In our own ways, we can make the world a holier place by our being in it. As the Most Reverend Michael Curry, our Presiding Bishop, said about Christmas, "God is showing us the Way to become God's children, and as God's children, brothers and sisters of each other. God is

showing us in Jesus how to become God's family and how to change, and build, and make a world where everybody is a part of that family. Where children don't go to bed hungry. Where no one has to be lonely. Where justice is real for all and where love is the ultimate law."**

So like God's love, Christmas is greater and closer to us than we realize, far more than the world would have us believe. But the world's preferences don't matter, for through our thoughts and feelings and actions, the God who transcends the world and who entered the world will change the world, not by force, but by boundless love and humble grace. That's why the carol is not Joy to Ourselves and People Just Like Us, but Joy to the World. And so the world's fascination is understandable.

Like a small child holding a baby, on an emotional level the world feels that Christmas must change everything, even if it doesn't understand quite how. This fascination is to our advantage, for being transformed by God with us, we can by our holy words and actions teach the world the meaning of Christmas, the meaning of power in humility, and joy in love.

*<https://xkcd.com/1932/>

**<https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2017/12/12/presiding-bishop-michael-currys-christmas-message/>