

“The Enchanted One” Christmas Day 2011

Come, Thou long-expected Jesus, / born to set Thy people free; / from our fears and sins release us, / let us find our rest in Thee.

Long ago in a distant land there lived a king of a mighty nation who was like no other king. He had fantastic wealth, unrivaled power, and a glorious castle. The king had everything, it seemed, everything but someone to love him; and often, especially during the long, cold nights of winter, he felt very much alone in his empty castle.

One day, as he was traveling through a distant village of his realm, the king saw the most beautiful woman he had ever met, and his power melted into love. When he returned to his castle, the king could not forget the humble servant girl he had seen down in the little village. He thought about her night and day, wondering to himself how he might offer his love to her without frightening her away with his great power. Of course, he could speak his love to the young woman who would never deny such a powerful king. She might even say that she loved him, but he would never really know if her words were true.

Finally, the king decided what he would do. He removed his royal robes and dressed himself in the rags of a peasant. He slipped away from the palace alone one starlit night, and journeyed far down into the village below where he took up the life of a poor farmer. And there he wooed the young woman. Eventually, the maiden grew to love the kindness and tenderness of the man. The two of them spoke of marriage. And, at just the right time, the man revealed himself to woman as the king.

The person who tells this simple story concludes, “For love is *exultant* when it unites equals, but it is *triumphant* when it makes that which was unequal equal in love” (Kierkegaard).

“For love is *exultant* when it unites equals, but it is *triumphant* when it makes that which was unequal equal in love.” “And the Word became flesh and [pitched a tent] among us, full of grace and truth. . .” (John 1:14).

What takes place at Christmas, Luther said, is a “joyful exchange,” as in marriage, by which Christ takes our sins to himself and at the same time gives his blessings of righteousness and life to the believer. “So we have known and believe the love that God has for us,” we hear in the First Letter of John, “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (I John 4:16). God is not only almighty, says Christmas, but God is love. . . *for us*.

Years ago, in a volume stirringly entitled, *The Crucified God*, Jurgen Moltmann wrote, “A God who is only [all-powerful] is in himself an incomplete being, for he cannot experience helplessness and powerlessness. Omnipotence can indeed be longed for and worshiped by helpless [humanity], but omnipotence is never loved; it is only feared. . . For a God who is incapable of suffering is a being who cannot be involved. . . He cannot weep, for he has no tears. . . If God were incapable of suffering, then he would also be incapable of love.”

“Omnipotence is never loved; it is only feared.” But “there is no fear in love,” John continues, “but perfect love casts out fear. . .” (I John 4:18). “And the angel said unto [the shepherds], ‘Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy’” (Luke 2:10). The grip of fear on human hearts shall give way to the far greater power of love: “Perfect love casts out fear.”

We don’t get very far into the Bible when fear comes stalking through Adam’s heart. He and the woman try to hide themselves among the trees when “they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day” (Genesis 3:8).

“I heard the sound of Thee. . .,” Adam whispers, “and I was afraid. . .” (Genesis 3:10).

In an old Peanuts cartoon, Linus, the smartest and most articulate of the Charles Schultz characters, tells Charlie Brown, “When I hear those coyotes howling at night, it totally depresses me. I start to feel lonely. . . And then I get scared.”

The ever pragmatic Charlie Brown says, “But I thought holding onto that blanket made you secure.” Linus replies, “I think the warranty has run out.”

A famous preacher was once asked why people come to church. He thought for a moment and then said, “I think they come hoping to hear some word from beyond themselves.”

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You see, the warranty has run out on our security blankets, even before we ever got them to the cashier. Our lonely hearts have fallen prey to the howling fears of the night. And the word from beyond ourselves is this: “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy. . . .”

“I bring *you* tidings of great joy.”

“What good would it do me,” Luther asked on Christmas, “if he were born a thousand times and if this were sung to me everyday with the loveliest airs, if I should not hear that there was something in it *for me* and that it should be *my own*.”

“Behold, I bring *you* tidings of great joy.” And a joyful heart is a thankful heart.

I was asking my friend, Chris, who runs the Blueberry Hill Restaurant in LaGrange, how he stays so happy, always walking around with a big smile on his face, greeting the guests at his restaurant. I suggested that maybe it’s because he always has so many customers at his tables.

“Pastor Dennis,” he said, “The Greeks have a saying: ‘When a chicken takes a drink of water, it raises its head to swallow, and gives thanks and praise to God.’”

One day Saint Francis and Brother Leo were walking down the road. Noticing that Leo was depressed, Francis turned and asked: “Leo, do you know what it means to be pure of heart?”

“Of course,” he replied, “It means to have no sins, faults or weaknesses to reproach myself for.”

“Ah,” said Francis, “Now I understand why you’re sad. We will always have something to reproach ourselves for.”

“Right,” said Leo. “That’s why I despair of ever arriving at purity of heart.”

“Leo, listen carefully to me,” said Francis, “Don’t be so preoccupied with the purity of your heart. Turn and look at Jesus. Admire him. Rejoice that he is what he is—your Brother, your Friend, your Lord and Savior. That, little brother, is what it means to be pure of heart. And once you’ve turned to Jesus, don’t turn back and look at yourself. . . . Focus your vision outside yourself on the beauty and graciousness and compassion of Jesus. . . . The pure of heart praise him from sunrise to sundown. Even when they feel broken, feeble, distracted, insecure and uncertain, they are able to release it into his peace. A heart like that is stripped and filled—stripped of self and filled with the fullness of God.”

I conclude with a beautiful story recounted every Christmas in the forests of southern France about the *four* shepherds of Bethlehem who came to see the child. One brought eggs, another bread and cheese, and a third brought wine. And the fourth shepherd brought nothing at all. People called this fourth shepherd “The Enchanted One.”

The first three shepherds chatted with Mary and Joseph, commenting on how well Mary looked after the birth, how cozy the cave was that Joseph had fixed it up, and what a splendid starlit night it was. These three shepherds congratulated the proud parents, presented them with their gifts, and assured them that if they needed anything else, they had only to ask.

Finally someone wondered, “Where is The Enchanted One?” They searched high and low, up and down, inside and out. And, finally, someone peeked through the blanket hanging against the draft into the manger of the Holy Infant. And there, kneeling at the baby’s side, was The Enchanted One. Like a flame blown by the wind, The Enchanted One had taken the direction of love. And, throughout the entire night, he stayed in adoration, whispering, “Jesu, Jesu, Jesu.”

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—DJL