Immanuel, Christ With Us
An Advent Reader

2016
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Waiting is not a very popular attitude. Waiting is not something that people think about with great sympathy. In fact, most people consider waiting a waste of time. Perhaps this is because the culture in which we live is basically saying, “Get going! Do something! Show you are able to make a difference! Don’t just sit there and wait!” For many people, waiting is an awful desert between where they are and where they want to go. And people do not like such a place. They want to get out of it by doing something.

In our particular historical situation, waiting is even more difficult because we are so fearful. One of the most pervasive emotions in the atmosphere around us is fear. People are afraid – afraid of inner feelings afraid of other people, and also afraid of the future. Fearful people have a hard time waiting, because when we are afraid we want to get away from where we are. But if we cannot flee, we may fight instead. Many of our destructive acts come from the fear that something harmful will be done to us. And if we take a broader perspective – that not only individuals but whole communities and nations might be afraid of being harmed – we can understand how hard it is to wait and how tempting it is to act. Here are the roots of a “first strike” approach to others. People who live in a world of fear are more likely to make aggressive, hostile, destructive responses than people who are not so frightened. The more afraid we are, the harder waiting becomes. That is why waiting is such an unpopular attitude for many people.

It impresses me, therefore, that all the figures who appear on the first pages of Luke’s Gospel are waiting. Zechariah and Elizabeth are waiting. Mary is waiting. Simeon and Anna, who were there at the temple when Jesus was brought in, are waiting. The whole opening scene of the good news is filled with waiting people. And right at the beginning all those people in some way or another hear the words, “Do not be afraid. I have something good to say to you.” These words set the tone and the context. Now Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary, Simeon and Anna are waiting for something new and good to happen to them.

Who are these figures? They are representatives of the waiting Israel. The psalms are full of this attitude: “My soul is waiting for the Lord. I count on his word. My soul is longing for the Lord more than a watchman for daybreak (Let the watchman count on daybreak and Israel on the Lord.) because with the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption. (Psalm 130:5-7). “My soul is waiting for the Lord” – that is the song that reverberates all through the Hebrew scriptures.

But not all who dwell in Israel are waiting. In fact we might say that the prophets criticized the people (at least in part) for giving up their attentiveness to what was coming. Waiting finally became the attitude of the remnant of Israel, of that small group of Israelites that remained faithful. The prophet Zephaniah says, “In your midst I will leave a humble and
lowly people, and those who are left in Israel will seek refuge in the name of Yahweh. They will do no wrong, will tell no lies; and the perjured tongue will no longer be found in their mouths” (Zephaniah 3:12-13). It is the purified remnant of faithful people who are waiting. Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary and Simeon are representatives of that remnant. They have been able to wait, to be attentive, to live expectantly.

But what is the nature of waiting? What is the practice of waiting? How are they waiting, and how are we called to wait with them?

Waiting, as we see it in the people on the first pages of the Gospel, is waiting with a sense of promise. “Zechariah,...your wife Elizabeth is to bear you a son.” “Mary,...Listen! You are to conceive and bear a son” (Luke 1:13, 31). People who wait have received a promise that allows them to wait. They have received something that is at work in them, like a seed that has started to grow. This is very important. We can only really wait if what we are waiting for has already begun for us. So waiting is never a movement from nothing to something. It is always a movement from something to something more. Zechariah, Mary, and Elizabeth were living with a promise that nurtured them, that fed them, and that made them able to stay where they were. And in this way, the promise itself could grow in them and for them.

Second, waiting is active. Most of us think of waiting as something very passive, a hopeless state determined by events totally out of our hands. The bus is late? You cannot do anything about it, so you have to sit there and just wait. It is not difficult to understand the irritation people feel when somebody says, “Just wait.” Words like that seem to push us into passivity.

But there is none of this passivity in scripture. Those who are waiting are waiting very actively. They know that what they waiting for is growing from the ground on which they are standing. That’s the secret. The secret of waiting is the faith that the seed has been planted, that something has begun. Active waiting means to be present fully to the moment, in the conviction that something is happening where you are and that you want to be present to it. A waiting person is someone who is present to the moment, who believes that this moment is the moment.

A waiting person is a patient person. The word patience mans the willingness to stay where we are and live the situation out to the full in the belief that something hidden there will manifest itself to us. Impatient people are always expecting the real thing to happen somewhere else and therefore want to go elsewhere. The moment is empty. But patient people dare to stay where they are. Patient living means to live actively in the present and wait there. Waiting, then is not passive. It involves nurturing the moment, as a mother nurtures the child that is growing in her. Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary were very present to the moment. That is why they could hear the angel. They were alert, attentive to the voice that spoke to them and said, “Don’t be afraid. Something is happening to you. Pay attention.”
But there is more. Waiting is open-ended. Open-ended waiting is hard for us because we tend to wait for something very concrete, for something that we wish to have. Much of our waiting is filled with wishes: “I wish that I would have a job. I wish that the weather would be better. I wish that the pain would go.” We are full of wishes, and our waiting easily gets entangled in those wishes. For this reason, a lot of our waiting is not open-ended. Instead, our waiting is a way of controlling the future. We want the future to go in a very specific direction and if this does not happen we are disappointed and can even slip into despair. That is why we have such a hard time waiting: we want to do the things that will make the desired events take place. Here we can see how wishes tend to be connected with fears.

But Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary were not filled with wishes. They were filled with hope. Hope is something very different. Hope is trusting that something will be fulfilled, but fulfilled according to the promises and not just according to our wishes. Therefore, hope is always open-ended.

I have found it very important in my own life to let go of my wishes and start hoping. It was only when I was willing to let go of wishes that something really new, something beyond my own expectations could happen to me. Just imagine what Mary was actually saying in the words, “I am the handmaid of the Lord...let what you have said be done to me” (Luke 1:38). She was saying “I don’t know what this all means, but I trust that good things will happen.” She trusted so deeply that her waiting was open to all possibilities. And she did not want to control them. She believe that when she listened carefully, she could trust what was going to happen.

To wait open-endedly is an enormously radical attitude toward life. So is to trust that something will happen to us that is far beyond our own imaginings. So, too, is giving up control over our future and letting God define our life, trusting that God molds us according to God’s love and not according to our fear. The spiritual life is a life in which we wait, actively present to the moment, trusting that new things will happen to us, new things that are far beyond our own imagination, fantasy, or prediction. That, indeed, is a very radical stance toward life in a world preoccupied with control.

Now let me say something about the practice of waiting. How do we wait? One of the most beautiful passages of scripture is Luke 1:39-56, which suggest that we wait together, as did Mary and Elizabeth. What happened when Mary received the words of promise? She went to Elizabeth. Something was happening to Elizabeth as well as to Mary. But how could they live that out?

I find the meeting of these two women very moving, because Elizabeth and Mary came together and enabled each other to wait. Mary’s visit made Elizabeth aware of what she waiting for. The child leapt for joy in her. Mary affirmed Elizabeth’s waiting. And then Elizabeth said to Mary “Blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled.” And Mary responded, “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord” (Luke 1: 45-46). She burst into joy herself. These two women created space for each other to wait. They affirmed for each other that something was happening that was worth waiting for.

I think that is the model of the Christian community. It is a community of support, celebration, and affirmation in which we can lift up what has already begun in us. The visit of Elizabeth and Mary is one of the Bible’s most beautiful expressions of what it means to form community, to be together, gathered around a promise, affirming that something is really happening.
This is what prayer is all about. It is coming together around the promise. This is what celebration is all about. It is lifting up what is already there. This is what Eucharist is about. It is saying, “thank you” for the seed that has been planted. It is saying, “We are waiting for the Lord, who has already come.”

The whole meaning of the Christian community lies in offering a space in which we wait for that which we have already seen. Christian community is the place where we keep the flame alive among us and take it seriously, so that it can grow and become stronger in us. In this way we can live with courage, trusting that there is a spiritual power in us that allows us to live in this world without being seduced constantly by despair, lostness, and darkness. That is how we dare to say that God is a God of love even when we see hatred all around us. That is why we can claim that God is God of life even when we see death and destruction and agony all around us. We say it together. We affirm it in one another. Waiting together, nurturing what has already begun, expecting its fulfillment – that is the meaning of marriage, friendship, community, and the Christian life.

Our waiting is always shaped by alertness to the word. It is waiting in the knowledge that someone wants to address us. The question is, are we home? Are we at our address, ready to respond to the doorbell? We need to wait together to keep each other at home spiritually, so that when the word comes it can become flesh in us. That is why the book of God is always in the midst of those who gather. We read the word so that the word can become flesh and have a whole new life in us.

Simone Weil, a Jewish writer, said, “Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life.” When Jesus speaks about the end of time, he speaks precisely about the importance of waiting. He says that nations will fight against nations and there will be wars and earthquakes and misery. People will be in agony, and they will say, “The Christ is there! No, he is here!” Everybody will be totally upset, and many will be deceived. But Jesus says you must stand ready, stay awake, stay tuned to the word of God, so that you will survive all that is going to happen and be able to stand confidently (con-fide, with trust) in the presence of God together in community (see Matthew 24). That is the attitude of waiting that allows us to be people who can live in a very chaotic world and survive spiritually.
I walk out onto the deck of my cottage, looking up at the great river of the milky Way flowing across the sky. A sliver of a moon hangs in the southwest, with the evening star gently in the curve.

Evening. Evening of this day. Evening of my own life.

I look at the stars and wonder. How old is the universe? All kinds of estimates have been made and, as far as we can tell, not one is accurate. All we know is that once upon a time or, rather, once before time, Christ called everything into being in a great breath of creativity – waters, land, green growing things, birds and beasts, and finally human creatures – the beginning, the genesis, not in ordinary Earth days; the Bible makes it quite clear that God’s time is different from our time. A thousand years for us is no more than the blink of an eye to God. But in God’s good time the universe came into being, opening up from a tiny flower of nothingness to great clouds of hydrogen gas to swirling galaxies. In God’s good time came solar systems and planets and ultimately this planet on which I stand on this autumn evening as the Earth makes its graceful dance around the sun. It takes one Earth day, one Earth night, to make a full turn, part of the intricate pattern of the universe. And God called it good, very good.

A sky full of God’s children! Each galaxy, each star, each living creature, every particle and subatomic particle of creation, we are all children of the Maker. From a subatomic
particle with a life span of a few seconds, to a galaxy with a life span of billions of years, to us human creatures somewhere in the middle in size and age, we are made in God’s image, male and female, and we are, as Christ promised us, God’s children by adoption and grace.

Children of God, made in God’s image. How? Genesis gives no explanations, but we do know instinctively that it is not a physical image. God’s explanation is to send Jesus, the incarnate One, God enfleshed. Don’t try to explain the Incarnation to me! It is further from being explainable than the furthest star in the furthest galaxy. It is love, God’s limitless love enfleshing that love into the form of a human being, Jesus, the Christ, fully human and fully divine.

Was there a moment, known only to God, when all the stars held their breath, when the galaxies paused in their dance for a fraction of a second, and the Word, who had called it all into being, went with all his love into the womb of a young girl, and the universe started to breathe again, and the ancient harmonies resumed their song, and the angels clapped their hands for joy?

Power. Greater power than we can imagine, abandoned, as the Word knew the powerlessness of the unborn child, still unformed, taking up almost no space in the great ocean of amniotic fluid, unseeing, unhearing, unknowing, slowly growing, as any human embryo grows, arms and legs and a head, eyes, mouth, nose, slowly swimming into life until the ocean in the womb is no longer large enough, and it is time for birth.

Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity, Christ, the Maker of the universe, or perhaps many universes, willingly and lovingly leaving all that power and coming to this poor, sin-filled planet to live with us for a few years to show us what we ought to be and could be. Christ came to us as Jesus of Nazareth, wholly human and wholly divine, to show us what it means to be made in God’s image.

Jesus, as Paul reminds us, was the firstborn of many brethren.

I stand on the deck of my cottage, looking at the sky full of God’s children and know that I am one of them.
To Believe  
Karl Barth

Then the angle of the Lord appeared to Zechariah, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John…”

Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”

The angel answered, “I am Gabriel, I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time.”

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

Luke 1:11-22

There are so many gates and doors that must finally be lifted high and opened wide, and there are still many prisoners who must finally be set free. For truly we are among the prisoners, and among the gates that should be opened, I include our closed ears and lips. Our lips! Because we are actually quite similar to poor Zechariah, of whom we have just read. After all, something burns in our hearts that would gladly come out. Something often flames up in our soul that we would like to call out to all people – a question, a complaint a word of defiance, a rejoicing a stark truth – something of the sort that a person simply cannot keep to himself, once it is there.

It saddens us to be so alone, to be unable to share with anyone what moves us. It also saddens us to see other people coming and going, all in their own way, all in so much error and dullness when we have something to tell them that would help them. For we sense that their concern is at root our own concern. Above all it saddens us that we are so cut off from each other, that there are always such different worlds – you in your house and me in my house, you with your thoughts and me with mine. This is simply not the way life is meant to be, this separate life we all lead. But with one single change we could have infinitely more joy and good fortune and righteousness among us, if we could open our hearts and talk with each other.

And then we experience the fact that we are mute. Yes, we certainly talk with each other, we find words all right, but never the right words; never the words that would really do justice to what actually moves us, what actually lives in us; never the words that would really lead us out of our loneliness into community. Our talk is always such an imperfect, wood-
en, dead talk. Fire will not break out in it, but can only smolder in our words.

Hearing the story of Zechariah, I immediately have to think of myself. I have so often climbed up into the pulpit, and experience just what is said here: “And when Zechariah came out, he could not speak with them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the Temple. And he made signs to them and remained dumb.” I once thought it so easy to preach, but now it strikes me as harder and harder to say what needs to be said. All the better do I understand the men of the Bible, Moses, and Jeremiah and others who beseeched God not to make them speak of him, because they simply could not. All our lips are bound. And my plight is also your plight. I am not able to speak, because you too are not able. You do not speak with me either. What you say to me is at most only an incomprehensible gesture; I hear only words. O, our closed up lips! Who can finally open them for us!

Zechariah was mute because he did not believe the angel. We all are just like Zachariah in the sanctuary. Every one of us has a hidden side of our being that is, as it were, in touch with God. We are secretly in a close connection with the eternal truth and love, even if we ourselves are not aware of it. And from this other hidden side of our being resounds a voice that is actually speaking to us constantly. “Gabriel, who stands before God,” spoke to Zechariah. We could think of the words of Jesus, that even the least have an angel who always beholds the face of the Father in heaven (Mt. 18:10). This angel stands before God, but sometimes, in the sanctuary, he also stands right before us. He speaks with God, but he also speaks with us.

However else we think about it, the living word of God is available to us. It is a word that, in contrast to all human words, is clear, intelligible and unambiguous. Yes, this inward word of God, which God speaks to us by means of his angels, contains precisely that which so moves and unsettles us. It is this word that so delights and grieves us, and which we would so gladly tell one another.

Without this word we would not suffer so deeply from the need that presses in upon us, and from the injustice that we must stand by and watch. We would not be able to resist so powerfully and become so indignant against the lies and violence that we see dominating life apart from this word. We would not have the urge to exercise love and to become loving if it were not for the fact that within us is God’s voice, placed into our heart. In this way God spoke to Zechariah of something quite grand – a coming great decision and turning of all things, of the approaching better age at hand, of the Savior meant to become a helper for the people, and of his herald, whose father he himself would become.

Believing is not something as special and difficult or even unnatural as we often suppose. Believing means that what we listen to, we listen to as God’s speech. What moves us is not just our own concern, but precisely God’s concern. What causes me worry, that is God’s worry, what gives me joy is God’s joy, what I hope for is God’s hope. In other words, in all
that I am, I am only a party to that which God thinks and does. In all that I do it is not I, but rather God who is important. Imagine if everything were brought into this great and proper connection, if we were willing to suffer, be angry, love and rejoice with God, instead of always wanting to make everything our own private affair, as if we were alone.

Just imagine if we were to adapt everything that gratifies and moves us into the life and movement of God’s kingdom, so that we personally are, so to speak, taken out of play. Simply love! Simply hope! Simply rejoice! Simply strive! But in everything, do it no longer from yourself, but rather from God! Everything great that is hidden in you can indeed be great only in God.

Don’t you think we would learn to talk with one another if we would cease speaking about our own separate concerns; if the human would cease putting itself in front of the divine? What would happen to us if we approached each other thinking: what he is saying is not on his own, but rather on a higher authority, not because he wants to, but because he must. Wouldn’t we then once and for all find the words, the right words? Might we not be able to truly hear and understand?

God’s thoughts are in us and over us. Yet we must learn to believe, believe that everything depends upon the God who stands behind us; we are in his hand. The greatest, the best in us is precisely not our own private concern, but rather God’s. Ah, if I could only believe it! It need not be complicated. Let the divine that you do recognize actually be divine for once! Or perhaps you and I like our insecurity and instability compared to the thoughts of God. Perhaps we prefer to place ourselves next to the truth instead of in the truth?

We must once and for all give up trying to be self-made individuals. Let us cease preaching by ourselves, being right by ourselves, doing good by ourselves, being sensible by ourselves, improving the world by ourselves. God wants to do everything, certainly through us and with us and never without us; but our participation in what he does must naturally originate and grow out of his power, not ours. O, how we could then speak with one another. For whatever does not grow out of God produces smoke, not fire. But that which is born of God overcomes the world (1 Jn 5:4). We only need to speak with our fellow men on the basis of faith. So long as our words do not arise from faith, from our confidence in the power of God, we will be and remain mute. Only faith can speak. But faith can speak! This is how our ears must be opened and then also our mouths.

So now here we stand, simultaneously deaf and mute like Zechariah. Ah yes, we only want to pretend to be next to him. In spite of his unbelief, he was still a herald of Advent, one who waited for God. Otherwise the angel would not have spoken with him. Nor would he have become the father of John the Baptist. When everything came to pass which he could not believe and could not express, then he was suddenly able to believe and speak. For God does not stand still when we come to a standstill, but precedes us with his deeds and only waits so that we can follow. And so we will accept – even with all that we cannot say,
and with all that we have not yet heard – that we are also heralds of Advent. We will finally believe, and then we will also hear.

The Coming of Jesus in Our Midst
Dietrich Bonhoeffer

*Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.*

Revelation 3:20

When early Christianity spoke of the return of the Lord Jesus, they thought of a great day of judgement. Even though this thought may appear to us to be so unlike Christmas, it is original Christianity and to be taken extremely seriously. When we hear Jesus knocking, our conscience first of all pricks us: Are we rightly prepared? Is our heart capable of becoming God’s dwelling place? Thus Advent becomes a time of self-examination. “Put the desires of your heart in order, O human beings!” (Valentin Thilo), as the old song sings. It is very remarkable that we face the thought that God is coming so calmly, whereas previously peoples trembled at the day of God, whereas the world fell into trembling when Jesus Christ walked over the earth. That is why we find it so strange when we see the marks of God in the world so often together with the marks of human suffering, with the marks of the cross on Golgotha. We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love
and of God’s coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God’s coming should arouse in us. We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect that the God of the world draws near to the people of our earth and lays claim to us. The coming of God is truly not only glad tidings, but first of all frightening news for everyone who has a conscience.

Only when we have felt the terror of the matter can we recognize the comparable kindness. God comes into the very midst of evil and of death, and judges the evil in us and in the world. And by judging us, God cleanses and sanctifies us, comes to us with grace and love. God makes us happy as only children may be happy. God wants to always be with us, wherever we may be – in our sin in our suffering and death. We are no longer alone; God is with us. We are no longer homeless; a bit of the eternal home itself has moved unto us. Therefore we adults can rejoice deeply within our hearts under the Christmas tree, perhaps much more than the children are able. We know that God’s goodness will once again draw near. We think of all of God’s goodness that came our way last year and sense something of this marvelous home. Jesus comes in judgement and grace: “Behold I stand at the door…Open wide the gates!”

(Ps. 24:7)…

One day, at the last judgement, he will separate the sheep and the goats and will say to those on his right: “Come, you blessed…I was hungry and you fed me…” (Matt. 25:34). To the astonished question of when and where, he answered: “What you did to the least of these, you have done to me…” (Matt. 25:40). With that we are faced with the shocking reality; Jesus stands at the door and knocks, in complete reality. He asks you for help in the form of a ruined human being in torn clothing. He confronts you in every person that you meet. Christ walks on the earth as your neighbor as long as there are people. He walks on the earth as the one through whom God calls you, speaks to you and makes his demands. That is the greatest seriousness and the greatest blessedness of the Advent message. Christ stands at the door. He lives in the form of the person in our midst. Will you keep the door locked or open it to him?

Christ is still knocking. It is not yet Christmas. But it is also not the great final Advent, the final coming of Christ. Through all the Advents of our life that we celebrate goes the longing for the final Advent, where it says: “Behold, I make all things new” (Rev. 21:5). Advent is a time of waiting. Our whole life, however, is Advent – that is, a time of waiting for the ultimate, for the time when there will be a new heaven and a new earth, when all people are brothers and sisters and one rejoices in the words of the angels: “On earth peace to those on whom God’s favor rests.” Learn to wait, because he has promised to come. “I stand at the door…” We however call to him: “Yes, come soon, Lord Jesus!” Amen.
To You Christ Is Born

Martin Luther

The angel said to them, “Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all the people; for there is born to you this day a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

Luke 2:10

The Gospel teaches that Christ was born, and that he died and suffered everything on our behalf, as is here declared by the angel. In these words you clearly see that he is born for us.

He does not simply say, Christ is born, but to you he is born. Neither does he say, I bring glad tidings, but to you I bring glad tidings of great joy. Furthermore, this joy was not to remain in Christ, but it shall be to all the people. This faith no condemned or wicked man has, nor can he have it. Christ has a pure, innocent, and holy birth. Man has an unclean, sinful, condemned birth; as David says (Psalms 51:5): “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.” Nothing can help this unholy birth except the pure birth of Christ. For this purpose Christ willed to be born, that through him we might be born anew.

O, this is the great joy of which the angel speaks. This is the comfort and exceeding goodness of God that, if anyone believes this, he can boast of the treasure that Mary is his rightful mother, Christ his brother and God his father. For these things actually occurred and are true, but we must believe. This is the principal thing and the principal treasure in every Gospel. Christ must above all things become our own and we become his. This is what is meant by Isaiah 9:6 “Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given.” To you is born and given this child.

Therefore see to it that you do not treat the Gospel only as history, for that is only transient; neither regard it only as an example, for it is of no value without faith. Rather, see to it that you make this birth your own and that Christ be born in you. This will be the case if you believe, then you will repose in the lap of the virgin Mary and be her dear child. But you must exercise this faith and pray while you live; you cannot establish it too firmly. This is our foundation and inheritance, upon which good works must be built.

The Gospel does not merely teach about the history of Christ. No, it enables all who believe it to receive it as their own, which is the way the Gospel operates. Of what benefit would it be to me if Christ had been born a thousand times, and it would daily be sung into my ears in a most lovely manner, if I were never to hear that he was born for me and was to be my very own? If the voice gives forth this pleasant sound, even if it be in homely phrase, my heart listens with joy, for it is a lovely sound which penetrates the soul.

If Christ has indeed become your own, and you have by such faith been cleansed through him and have received your inheritance without any personal merit, it follows that you will
do good works by doing to your neighbor as Christ has done to you. Here good works are their own teacher. What are the good works of Christ? Is it not true that they are good because they have been done for your benefit, for God's sake, who commanded him to do the works in your behalf? In this then Christ was obedient to the Father, in that he loved and served us.

Therefore since you have received enough and become rich, you have no other commandment than to serve Christ and render obedience to him. Direct your works that they may be of benefit to your neighbor, just as the works of Christ are of benefit to you. For this reason Jesus said at the Last Supper: “This is my commandment, that you love one another; even as I have loved you.” Here it is seen that he loved us and did everything for our benefit, in order that we may do the same, not to him, for he needs it not, but to our neighbor. This is his commandment, and this is our obedience. Christ helps us, so we in return help our neighbor, and all have enough.

Notice then how far off those are who expend their energies uniting good works with stone. Of what benefit is it to your neighbor if you build a church entirely out of gold? Of what benefit to him is the frequent ringing of great church bells? Of what benefit to him is the glitter and the ceremonies in the churches, the clergy’s robes, the sanctuary? Of what benefit to him are the many candles or the singing of vigils and liturgies? Do you think that God wants to be served with the sound of bells, the smoke of candles and such fancies? He has commanded none of these, but if you see your neighbor going astray, sinning, or suffering in body or soul, you are to leave every thing else and at once help him in every way in your power and if you can do no more, help him with words of comfort and prayer. Thus has Christ done to you and given you an example for you to follow.

Here Jesus does what he says: “And the poor have good tidings preached to them,” and “Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 11:5; 5:8). Here are no learned, no rich, no mighty ones, for such people do not as a rule accept the Gospel. The Gospel is a heavenly treasure, which will not tolerate any other treasure, and will not agree with any earthly guest in the heart. Therefore whoever loves the one must let go the other, as Christ says, “You cannot serve God and mammon” (Mt. 6:24).

This is shown by the shepherds in that they were in the field, under the canopy of heaven, and not in houses, showing that they do not hold fast and cling to temporal things. And besides being in the fields by night, they are despised by and unknown to the world which sleeps in the night, and by day delights so to walk that it may be noticed; but the poor shepherds go about their work at night. They represent all the lowly who live on earth, often despised and unnoticed but dwelling under the protection of heaven; they eagerly desire the Gospel.

That there were shepherds means that no one is to hear the Gospel for himself alone, but every one is to tell it to others who are not acquainted with it. For he who believes for him-
self has enough and should endeavor to bring others to such faith and knowledge, so that one may be a shepherd of the other, to wait upon and lead him into the pasture of the Gospel in this world, during the nighttime of this earthly life. At first the shepherds were sore afraid because of the angel; for human nature is shocked when it first hears in the Gospel that all our works are nothing and are condemned before God, for it does not easily give up its prejudices and presumptions.

Therefore let us beware of all teaching that does not set forth Christ. What more would you know? What more do you need, if indeed you know Christ, as above set forth, if you walk by faith in God, and by love to your neighbor, doing to him as Christ has done to you. This is indeed the whole scripture in its briefest form: that no more words or books are necessary, but only life and action.

Let everyone examine himself in the light of the Gospel and see how far he is from Christ, and what is the character of his faith and love. There are many who are enkindled with dreamy devotion, and when they hear of the poverty of Christ, they denounce their blindness and ingratitude and think, if they had been there, they would have shown the Lord and his mother a more kindly service, and would not have permitted them to be treated so miserably. But they do not look by their side to see how many of their fellow humans need their help, and which they ignore in their misery. Who is there upon earth that has no poor, miserable, sick, erring ones around him? Why does he not exercise his love to those? Why does he not do to them as Christ has done to him?
The Grand Miracle

C.S. Lewis

Supposing you had before you a manuscript of some great work, either a symphony or a novel. There then comes to you a person saying, “Here is a new bit of the manuscript that I found; it is the central passage of that symphony, or the central chapter of that novel. The text is incomplete without it. I have got the missing passage which is really the center of the whole work.” The only thing you could do would be to put this new piece of the manuscript in that central position, and then see how it reflected on the whole of the rest of the work. If it constantly brought out new meanings from the whole of the rest of the work, if it made you notice things in the rest of the work which you had not noticed before, then I think you would decide that it was authentic. On the other hand, if it failed to do that, then, however attractive it was in itself, you would reject it.

Now, what is the missing chapter in this case, the chapter which Christians are offering? The story of the Incarnation – the story of a descent and resurrection. When I say “resurrection” here, I am not referring simply to the first few hours, or the first few weeks of the Resurrection. I am talking of this whole, huge pattern of descent, down, down, and then up again. What we ordinarily call the Resurrection being just, so to speak, the point at which it turns. Think what that descent is. The coming down, not only into humanity, but into those nine months which precede human birth, in which they tell us we all recapitulate strange pre-human, sub-human, forms of life, and going lower still into being a corpse, a thing which, if this ascending movement had not begun, would presently have passed out of organic altogether, and have gone back into the inorganic, as all corpses do. One has a picture of someone going right down and dredging the sea-bottom. One has a picture of a strong man trying to lift a very big, complicated burden. He stoops down and gets himself right under it so that he himself disappears; and then he straightens his back and moves off with the whole thing swaying on his shoulders. Or else one has the picture of a diver, stripping off garment after garment, making himself naked, then flashing for a moment in the air, and then down through the green warm and sunlit water into the pitch black, freezing water down into the mud and slime, then up again, his lungs almost bursting, back again to the green and warm and sunlit water, and then at last out into the sunshine, holding in his hand the dripping thing he went down to get. This thing is human nature; but associated with it, all nature, the new universe. That indeed is a point I cannot go into here, because it would take a whole sermon – this connection between human nature and nature in general. It sounds startling, but I believe it can be fully justified.

Now as soon as you have thought of this, this pattern of the huge dive down to the bottom, into the depths of the universe and coming up again into the light, everyone will see at once how that is imitated and echoed by the principles of the natural world; the descent of the seed into the soil, and its rising again in the plants. There are also all sorts of things in our
own spiritual life, where a thing has to be killed, and broken, in order that it may then become bright and strong and splendid. The analogy is obvious…

In the Incarnation we get, of course, the idea of vicariousness of one person profiting by the earning of another person. In its highest form that is the very center of Christianity. And we also find this same vicariousness to be characteristic, or, as the musician would put it, a *leit-motif* of nature. It is a law of the natural universe that no being can exist on its own resources. Everyone, everything, is hopelessly indebted to everyone and everything else. In the universe, as we now see it, this is the source of many of the greatest horrors: all the horrors of carnivorousness, and the worse horrors of the parasites, those horrible animals that live under the skin of other animals, and so on. And yet, suddenly seeing it in the light of the Christian story, one realizes that vicariousness is not in itself bad; that all these animals and insects and horrors are merely that principle of vicariousness twisted in one way. For when you think it out, nearly everything good in nature also comes from vicariousness. After all, the child, both before and after birth, lives on its mother, just as the parasite lives on its host, the one being a horror, the other being the source of almost every natural goodness in the world. It all depends upon what you do with this principle. What is implied by the Incarnation just fits in exactly with what I have seen in nature, and (this is the important point) each time it gives it a new twist. If I accept this supposed missing chapter, the Incarnation, I find it begins to illuminate the whole of the rest of the manuscript. It lights up nature’s pattern…

That is why I think this Grand Miracle is the missing chapter in this novel, the chapter on which the whole plot turns; that is why I believe that God really has dived down into the bottom of creation, and has come up bringing the whole redeemed nature on His shoulders. The miracles that have already happened are, of course, as Scripture so often says, the first fruits of that cosmic summer which is presently coming on. Christ has risen, and so we shall rise. St. Peter for a few seconds walks on the water; and the day will come when there will be a re-made universe, infinitely obedient to the will of glorified and obedient men when we can do all things, when we shall be those gods that we are described as being in Scripture. To be sure, it feels wintry enough still: but often in the very early spring it feels like that. Two thousand years are only a day or two by this scale. A man really ought to say “The Resurrection happened two thousand years ago” in the same spirit in which he says, “I saw a crocus yesterday.” Because we know what is coming behind the crocus. The spring comes slowly down this way; but the great thing is that the corner has been turned. There is, of course, this difference that in the natural spring the crocus cannot choose whether it will respond or not. We can. We have the power either of withstanding the spring, and sinking back into the cosmic winter, or of going on into those “high midsummer pomps” in which our Leader, the Son of Man already dwells, and to which He is calling us. It remains with us to follow or not, to die in this winter or to go on into that spring and that summer.
**Only a Rumor**  
*Søren Kierkegaard*

*Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.*

Matthew 2:1-4

Although the scribes could explain where the Messiah should be born, they remained quite unperturbed in Jerusalem. They did not accompany the Wise Men to seek him. Similarly we may know the whole of Christianity, yet make no *movement*. The power that moved heaven and earth leaves us completely unmoved.

What a difference! The three kings had only a rumor to go by. But it moved them to make that long journey. The scribes were much better informed, much better versed. They sat and studied the Scriptures like so many dons, but it did not make them move. Who had the more truth? The three kings who followed a rumor, or the scribes who remained sitting with all their knowledge?

What a vexation it must have been for the kings, that the scribes who gave them the news they wanted remained quiet in Jerusalem! We are being mocked, the kings might have thought. For indeed what an atrocious self-contradiction that the scribes should have the knowledge and yet remain still. This is as bad as if a person knows all about Christ and his teachings, and his own life expresses the opposite. We are tempted to suppose that such a person wishes to fool us, unless we admit that he is only fooling himself.
Christmas

St Augustine of Hippo

*Truth sprang for the earth when the Word was made flesh.*

When we speak of Christmas, we mean the day on which the Wisdom of God manifested Itself as a speechless babe and the Word of God was heard in the voice of humankind when it cannot yet utter words. But that divinity, hidden though it was, was revealed to the Magi by a sign in the heavens and announced to the shepherds by the words of angels.

With due solemnity, therefore, do we celebrate the anniversary of the day on which were fulfilled the words of the prophecy: *Truth is sprung out of the earth, and justice hath looked down from heaven.* The Truth which abides in the bosom of the Father, is sprung out of the earth

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to dwell also in the bosom of a mother. The Truth which contains the world, is sprung out of the earth to be borne in the hands of a woman. The Truth which is the food of incorruption for the angels, is sprung out of the earth to receive milk from the breasts of woman. The Truth which the heavens cannot contain, is sprung out of the earth to be placed in a manger!

For whose benefit was it that such Sublimity came in all this lowliness? Certainly, not for Its own; but, if we have faith, it was for our own great benefit. Wake up, O man – it was for you that God was made man! Rise thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead; and Christ shall enlighten thee. For you, I say, was God made man. Eternal death would have awaited you, had He not been born in time. Never would you be freed from your sinful flesh, had He not taken to Himself the likeness of sinful flesh. Everlasting would be your misery, had He not performed this act of mercy. You would not have come to life again, had He not come to die your death. You would have broken down, had He not come to help you. You would have perished, had He not come.

Justice was brought to us by Christ's Incarnation

2. Let us joyfully celebrate the coming of our salvation and redemption. Let us celebrate the hallowed day on which the great Eternal Day came from the great Eternal Day into this, our so short and temporal day. Here He is made unto us...justice and sanctification and redemption: that, as it is written, “he that glorieth, may glory in the Lord.” That is to say, we were not to be proud like the Jews, who not knowing the justice of God and wanting to establish their own have not submitted themselves to the justice of God. Therefore, when it was said, Truth is sprung out of the earth, there followed, and justice hath looked down from heaven: mortal man in his weakness was not to arrogate this justice to himself, he was not to say that these things were properly his own; and man was to be prevented from rejecting God’s justice because he believed that he was justified by himself, that is, made just through his own power.

Truth, then, is sprung out of the earth: Christ who said, I am the truth, is born of a virgin. And justice hath looked down from heaven: man, believing in Him who has been born, has been justified not by himself, but by God.

Truth is sprung out of the earth, for they Word was made flesh. And justice hath looked down from heaven, for every best gift, and every perfect gift, is from above.

Truth is sprung out of the earth – flesh born of Mary. And justice hath looked down from heaven, for a man cannot receive any thing, unless it be given him from heaven.

The glory of God in gratuitous justification

3. Being justified therefore by faith, let us have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ; by whom we have also access into this grace, wherein we stand and glory in the hope of the glory of God. To this short passage from the Apostle, which you recognize with me, Brethren, it is inter-
esting to join a passage from the Psalm quoted, and to note how they are in agreement: **Being justified by faith, let us have peace with God, for justice and peace have kissed each other; through our Lord Jesus Christ, for Truth is sprung out of the earth; by whom we have also access into this grace, wherein we stand and glory in the hope of the glory of God.** He does not say, “of our glory,” but “of the glory of God”; because justice does not proceed from us, but hath looked down from heaven. **He that glorieth, therefore, may glory, not in himself, but in the Lord.** Because of this, even when the Lord, whose birthday we celebrate to-day, was born of the Virgin, the angels announced, **Glory to God in the highest; and on earth peace to men of good will.**

Whence is peace on earth, if not from the fact that **Truth is sprung out of the earth,** that is, Christ is born of flesh? And **He is our peace, who hath made both one,** that we might be men of good will, bound together by the sweet bonds of unity.

Let us, then, rejoice in this grace, that **our glory may be the testimony of our conscience,** wherein we **may glory,** not in ourselves, but in the Lord. Obviously, it was because of this that it was said, **my glory, and the lifter up of my head.** For what greater grace could have dawned upon us from God, than that He, who had only one Son, made Him the son of man, and so in turn made the son of man a son of God. Ask yourself whether this involved any merit, any motivation, any right on your part; and see whether you find anything but grace!