

Prelude,

Christmas Eve, 1969

U.S. Naval Amphibious Base

Norfolk, Virginia *part one*

The fresh-faced lad—just out of high school and boot camp, too young to vote or do much of anything but serve his country—stood staring out the darkened barracks window. The huge building was quiet with a heavy stillness that only fed the empty melancholy in his heart.

Earlier that day the barracks had slowly emptied out, a man at a time, as those fortunate enough to have family or friends nearby took off for a day or two celebration. The boy wondered whether they had left to celebrate Christmas—or just to celebrate a few days away from the navy. He guessed that it was a little of both.

One man at a time the building, with its endless rows of six-man cubicles, had lost most of its population, until finally the only signs of life heard were the muffled echoes of rock-and-roll music played from a few portable cassette players.

A chill hung over the Navy School of Music as early dusk draped itself across the Amphibious Base. The east coast was a long way from Iowa, and right now the boy felt as if he were on the moon. So *this is it*, he thought. "Well—Merry Christmas," he said bitterly to the empty cubicle.

The Beginning of Forever



Too Much

The real meaning of Christmas,

like so many other things in this age of insipid relativism, has been left up to the individual. In a world in which there are few absolutes, Christmas is up for grabs.

Hollywood would have us believe that the meaning of Christmas is a roster of block-buster movies intended to wow and entertain theatre-goers. Wall Street and the giants of commerce would have us believe that Christmas is the opportunity to make all the money that will cover their losses during the rest of the year; therefore, to them, Christmas is when common folks are reminded of all those things without which they cannot live even one more day.

Local news programs and charities want us to think that the real meaning of Christmas is brotherly love, charity, giving, and caring about each other. For them, Christmas is when the people who have, give to those who haven't.

On a certain level, they all are correct. There is nothing inherently wrong about entertainment, making money or, of course, giving things to the needy.

But, sadly, Christmas has become something more than what it really is. Like a squalling, demanding brat whose body has quickly outgrown his little playsuit, the Christmas of our time

has outgrown its original intent. The holiday has become something bursting at the seams, an annual occurrence in which every hope, every expectation, every escape from disappointment is invested. Christmas has become the climax to our year—the bright celebration meant to erase from our memory every sad moment that has come into our lives during the previous eleven months. If Christmas turns out to be everything we expect, we declare it to have been a good year; if Christmas is a disappointment, our year has been something less than it should have been.

Because of this, people today can't wait to celebrate the yuletide. Houses are now draped in brilliant, multi-colored sparkles well before Thanksgiving—that envious second cousin in the family of holidays, now just a sad, impatient foundling standing in the way of its more grand, and better-dressed, relation. Christmas decorations line the aisles of department and discount stores long before the ghouls of Halloween have finally been put out of our misery.

The problem is not so much that something has been *left out* of Christmas, but that too much has been put *in*. The occasion of Christmas—literally, the “Mass of Christ”—has become cluttered with so many events, so much eye-candy, so many things that have nothing to do with the day commemorated, that we can no longer make contact with—or even find amidst the chaff—the person at its center: the Christ child.

The Incarnation

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

(Isaiah 9:6 kjv)

The eternally existent Jesus Christ was born on earth so that He might die for our sins. He died for our sins so that we might have eternal life with the Father in heaven. His incarnation, then, was the beginning of our forever.

Some Christians quarrel with the heritage or terminology of our common “Christmas” holiday and, as a result, choose to ignore it. The venerated English preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon held to such a position.

We do not believe in the present ecclesiastical arrangement called Christmas. First, because we do not believe in the mass at all, but abhor it. And second, because we find no scriptural warrant for observing any day as the birthday of the Savior. Consequently, its observance is a superstition.

While I am loathe to disagree with the late, great Puritan pastor and writer, I can imagine no great sin in celebrating the moment at which my Salvation showed Himself to mankind. We can certainly take issue with the layering on of tradition, superstitious calendar-watching, and almost idolatrous high-holiness; we can detest the rabid commercialism that smothers December 25th of each year. But were we to disregard totally the remembrance, we would be ignoring an important part of Christ's gospel. For without His physical death, we could not enjoy eternity with the Father, and without His physical birth, He could not have died.

Truly God

But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.

(Galatians 4:4-5)

I imagine that if God had intended for us to disregard the event of Christ's earthly birth, then the early chapters of Matthew

and Luke would not have dwelt on it so. Perhaps they would have begun much like the gospel of Mark, with John's baptism of Jesus, or the gospel of John, with the more mystical beginnings of the Son of God.

Instead, the gospels of Matthew and Luke include rather detailed narratives of the night He was born (Luke) and the succeeding days in Bethlehem (Matthew), describing the birth itself, as well as the subsequent visits of the shepherds and magi. Here is the evidence that God would have us remember the occasion—indeed, to approach with reverence and to consider for awhile this first night, when Jehovah made physical contact with mankind.

He would have us feel the lonely chill of the shepherds' night, inhale the acrid musk of the hay that became the infant's bed, to understand the hearts of His earthly parents, and to experience the reverent adoration of a group of strangers who knew in their hearts that this child was, truly, God.

The true Christian religion...does not begin at the top, as all other religions do; it begins at the bottom. You must run directly to the manger and the mother's womb, embrace this Infant and virgin's Child in your arms, and look at Him—born, being nursed, growing up, going about in human society, teaching, dying, rising again, ascending above all the heavens, and having authority over all things.

(Martin Luther)

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.
ISRAEL'S STRENGTH AND CONSOLATION, HOPE OF ALL THE EARTH THOU ART;
DEAR DESIRE OF EVERY NATION, JOY OF EVERY LONGING HEART.

BORN THY PEOPLE TO DELIVER, BORN A CHILD AND YET A KING.
BORN TO REIGN IN US FOREVER, NOW THY GRACIOUS KINGDOM BRING.
BY THINE OWN ETERNAL SPIRIT RULE IN ALL OUR HEARTS ALONE;
BY THINE ALL SUFFICIENT MERIT, RAISE US TO THY GLORIOUS THRONE.

(CHARLES WESLEY)