

Facing the Christmas Confusion

What happens when God's miracle breaks through our expectations?

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The great American preacher Howard Thurman once said, "Christmas is a mood, a quality, a symbol. It is never merely fact.

As a fact it is a date on the calendar, but to the believer, it is the anniversary of the main event in human history. And while we may relate meaningfully to the fact or the event—that alone does not make Christmas."

As the season approaches each year, I carry within my mind and heart an image, a perfect picture actually, of what Christmas should look and feel like. I understand the fact—the event—quite well, but in Thurman's words, what I am really looking for is the mood, the quality, the symbol. As I attempt to analyze just what that means and where it leads, I discover that what I want is an unhindered, uncluttered, unconfused Christmas. I want time away from festivities and shopping and even formal worship to just be in touch with the miracle—to find the space where I can apprehend that Jesus truly is born in me today. But though I strive for and even preach toward such an experience, it never happens the way I plan—the way any of us plan.

Years ago while planting a church in Rhode Island, I led monthly worship services at two different nursing homes. At the one we had a nice room, a pianist, and an attentive group of people. In the other,

well, we had none of that. In fact, it was quite the opposite. Yet one year at Christmas, that's where I found myself, in more ways than one.

It was less than a week before Christmas and I was way too busy to be there. The residents and I met in what can best be described as a bulge in a hallway. To help set the mood, someone had placed a crooked artificial Christmas tree with cast-off ornaments and a dusty garland of popcorn hanging from it in the corner. The woman who often shouted during my talks was there. So was the man who sometimes slipped out of his wheelchair. There was also a painter working only a few feet away from us, and down the hall a radio blared music enlightening us to the activities of Rudolph and Frosty.

Our singing was off-key but heartfelt, and I began to think we would make it through better than expected. But as I shared the wonder and joy of the Christmas story, a family on a tour of the facility walked right through the middle of our gathering, a nurse dropped by to dispense medication to several worshipers, an aide came to take one resident back to her room, and before long the shouter began to shout and the slider began to slide.

By then, I was way past not wanting to be there. I looked over the gathering and wondered how many were coherent and whether it all made any difference. There



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wasn't much peace there—it was all chaos and confusion. And I came to the conclusion that if the people in charge of the place didn't care what was going on then I didn't either—and this would be my last time there.

The service finally ended and the smiles and hugs as people made their way down the hall softened me a little. Nonetheless, I reminded myself that I was done. After grabbing my coat and my Bible I turned around to see the painter standing in front of me. He said, "It's been a very long time since I've actually listened to that story. Even though I know it's true and I was raised in the church, I've left it all behind—for too long. It's time to get back. Thanks for reminding me of that today—when I was least expecting it."

I had forgotten that Christmas never was about the cessation of confusion or inconvenience. And after years of trying to get it right, that afternoon I realized that perhaps the

most meaningful experience of Christmas happens right in the very midst of confusion. The most powerful reality of God's love through Jesus Christ comes amid the turmoil and busyness and even despair. It comes when we have run out of trying to satisfy ourselves.

Isaiah foretells kingdoms in upheaval at the coming of Messiah. When we look at the key players in the drama, we find no gentle interlude as Christ is born. There is confusion everywhere, from Herod's court to the shepherds' field.

Consider Joseph. He and Mary have it all planned out, and life is scheduled to proceed as expected, but an inconvenient and incomprehensible twist materializes without Joseph's assistance. Talk about confusion! An angel sets him straight about this child to come, and instead of doing a good thing by separating quietly, he does a better thing by giving the child a name and a home. Right from

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the start, Christmas does not happen when all is settled down and quiet and peaceful.

Ask Mary. She had her own angelic visitation that shook her world apart. And even after the incredulous how and who questions were answered, she knew that confusion would linger and life would move in radically different ways. Look at the shepherds, out in the fields just doing their job, trying to stay awake and hoping nothing too dangerous or threatening would appear out of the darkness that night. They end up scared out of their minds as one angel—then a whole slew of them—sings songs and tells

CONTINUED ON PAGE 34

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9

strange stories.

As fear subsides and wonder grows, they allow this intrusion to change their world, and just like Joseph and Mary, they experience in the midst of their confusion the movement of God in all its mysterious glory to re-create reality and invite them in. What I need to absorb through these examples is that Christmas is more about giving one's self over to God's movement and Christ's presence than any simplistic notion of what I might do to manufacture an experience that merely reflects my own desire to feel good.

Life moves ahead with twists and turns, with interruptions and surprises—some pleasant, some difficult, some devastating. None of that takes a break at Christmas, but we are invited to the manger to witness a miracle that transcends every other thing. If we would, we can experience this moment of beauty and grace in the midst of a dark world filled with hate and confusion. For those who will see it and pay attention, that is what Christmas offers.

The painter in that nursing home hallway reminded me that Christmas is much more than an event we try to get right. Sometimes it takes disruption and chaos and a little bit of confusion to help us refocus our perfect images into something more fitting than we had planned. Something that allows the mood, the quality, the symbol and spirit of Christmas to finally flow over and own and change us—even when we're looking in the wrong direction.

Even though I will never have an uncluttered, unhindered, unconfused Christmas, still Christ comes, the good news is here, and we are all invited to enter right now the grand party the angels announce, saying, "Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." ■