

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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The Christmas Story: Belief or Nostalgia?

"I believe; I believe. It's silly, but I believe." These familiar words were spoken by young Susan Walker in the popular Christmas movie *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947). Today, her words accurately reflect how faith is commonly portrayed—a blind leap in the dark; believing for no reason at all. The shepherds, the wise men, the Bethlehem star, the babe in the manger make us feel warm, comfortable and happy, but whether it is all true or not is irrelevant. But what if it is true—all of it? What if the angels, the virgin birth, the Incarnation are true? What difference would it make? I suspect that even those who do not believe the facts of the Christmas story secretly wish they were true.

The narrative of Christmas is part of a much larger biblical narrative—the narrative of redemption. The Old Testament Prophets told of a coming Savior, the Messiah, who would be born in Bethlehem, die a substitutionary death, rise again and establish the kingdom of God on earth. Consistently using the term "fulfilled," the Gospel writers (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) establish the connections between the Prophets and Jesus, the one born that Christmas morning. The New Testament Epistles continue unfolding the redemptive story, which, they argue, brings hope, cleansing from sin and purpose for life. All this good news offers humanity God's love manifested in a person. It is the story of God becoming human in order that humans might dwell with Him forever. It is the Helper helping those who cannot help themselves, no matter how hard they try.

In 2017, the world will celebrate the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation, when an obscure Augustinian monk named Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses on the Castle Church door at Wittenberg, Germany. One of Luther's greatest legacies was his famous Nativity sermons, some of which he published in 1522. These sermons were essentially meditations on the biblical Christmas narrative. Among other things, Luther emphasized the humanness and ordinariness of Jesus to impress upon his congregation the magnitude of the incarnation, that God became one of them. He wrote: "To me there is no greater consolation given to mankind than this, that Christ became man, a child, a babe, playing in the lap and at the breasts of his most gracious mother." Luther stressed how God suddenly broke into the routineness of life through the incarnation. He brought theology down to earth in a way that is still today associated with Christmas.

Luther was right, for on Christmas morning, God entered space and time. Where creation introduced a gulf between two parallel worlds, Christmas now bridges that gap. The Lord of both worlds descended to live by the rules of the one and, because of His love, offers redemption and forgiveness to His creatures. For many people today, Christmas is not about the bridging of these two parallel worlds. It is about nostalgia, about feeling good. As we watch the seemingly endless Christmas movies and decorate our homes and businesses with the warm, white lights of Christmas, we feel good. We both remember and long for the seeming innocence of another age. But Christmas is not about nostalgia; it is about the Bethlehem Child. Because of Jesus, the despair and anarchy of life are replaced with meaning, purpose and hope. When things seemed at their worst, God bridged the gap

between the temporal and the eternal. In the first-century world, mesmerized by Roman power and glory, many overlooked the arrival of God's gift in Bethlehem, in a manger, under a star. In our day, many who are mesmerized by power, wealth and technology—and yet obsessed with the quest for nostalgia—still do. Set aside nostalgia and believe the story of Christmas, for it is true.