

Having a Star-Crossed Christmas!

As kids we worked on our annual Christmas list of all the things we wanted. We eventually learned that not all those Christmas wishes could be fulfilled. The shining presents under the shimmering tree eventually became the Christmas morning reality of a few treasured items along with a lot of unwanted stuff. Ultimately, things could never quite measure up to our wishes. Humanity's Christmas wish-list is found throughout the Old Testament. The voices of prophets and kings and common folk cry out to God for divine gifts that will bring fulfillment. Abraham calls out for offspring and for a homeland. The Hebrew slaves of Egypt call out for deliverance and freedom. The nation of Israel calls out for protection. The conquered Israelites call out for a second chance. The diaspora calls out for God's love and forgiveness. Every one of them called out for life - fruitful, peaceful, meaningful life. As remarkably bold and extravagant as this wish-list is, we find in Christ's birth that the promises and possibilities were fulfilled. Human desires and a divine pledge came together in Bethlehem under the star.

The Christmas story is about God's kept promise to humanity - a promise of forgiveness, deliverance, love, steadfastness - a promise of life itself. But the kept promise of Christmas morning is not yet a fulfilled promise. Isaiah's glorious words remind us of the promise God has made, of the beauty and wonders that are possible when God fulfills our greatest desires. It is James' text that reminds us that the promise we celebrate as incarnate on Christmas morning is not just the story of the star, but is also the story of the cross. For God's work of redemption for creation - fulfilling the wish-list of the Old Testament - is told in the New Testament, and it culminates in the crucifixion. God's promissory note doesn't have threats, it has nails. James counsel's patience and long-suffering in the face of a delayed second coming of Christ Jesus. He reminds his readers of the example of all the prophets and martyrs for the faith who have themselves suffered for the sake of Christ. His words reveal that the cost of fulfilling the greatest item on our wish-list is beyond price. The promise of Christmas is not just gentle-Jesus-meek-and-mild, it is also the presence of future suffering and the cross. It is a "star-cross" promise, shimmering with life all the more brightly because the darkness of death outlines it so starkly.

It is important that we not lose sight of the cross before the dazzle of the star. The tinselly shimmer given to Christmas by secular culture is partially due to the lack of contrast and depth in a light-bright holiday with no shadow side. Every year we celebrate Christmas and we celebrate Easter, because every year the world needs to delight in the star of Christ's birth and every year the world needs to again receive the gift of life made possible by Christ's death. When Christ came into the world to redeem us and show us the way the only place we made for him was a feeding trough and the only place Jesus finally found room was on the cross. The world shut Jesus out at birth, and the world ultimately hung the Christmas star on a cross. But together the star and the cross fulfilled the promise of life eternal. While there is nothing wrong with Christmas as a star-studded celebration, for Christians, stars without crosses are as flimsy and fake as the ones perched on top of our Christmas trees.