

The Lure of Love: The Christmas Revelation

I John 4: 7-9, 12, 16, 19; Luke 2: 1-14

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I hardly know how to begin. I've pondered long over how to engage you with what I want to say. I think my struggle derives from the fact that what I want to say seems so obvious, so expected, so ordinary at Christmas – that God is love, that love came down at Christmas, that heaven touched earth with love at Christmas, that the Christmas story is love talk.

What a story it is! A heavily pregnant teenager, unmarried, who had been visited by an angel, on an arduous journey with the faithful man to whom she was engaged. The story is so familiar – the crowded inn in which there was no room, the onset of labor pain, the cattle shed, the birth, the baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in the manger – the star, the angel chorus, the shepherds, the adoration.

A beautiful story; a lovely story that never fails to touch us deeply. And as many years as we have celebrated it in pageant and song and worship, it never loses its power to move us. For a brief season the world becomes a softer place.

God is love. The writer of the letter of First John said it just that way. In John's Gospel the familiar John 3: 16 tells us God so loved the world..., but I John 4:8 states it straight out – God is love. I wonder if that isn't so familiar that we don't hear it. Or, perhaps, we think of God loving us, the world, whatever, but how often do we really take in the straightforward statement that God is love. And, I suspect, even more rarely do we contemplate what that means for the world, for creation and history, its process and destiny.

Let me state my theme clearly: The Christmas revelation is precisely that God is love. And that I would claim is a radical affirmation. If God is love then the source, ground and goal of reality, of all being, is love and it is the lure of love that moves creation from planets and stars to people and particles in the cosmic dance. Love is the originating fount, the dynamic of the emerging process and the final destiny of being.

It would have been quite another revelation if God's presence had been marked by blinding power, scattering Rome's legions and establishing a Divine Potentate

to rule with a rod of iron. As a matter of fact John the Baptist hoped for such a display of God's power – the power of the righteous Ruler of the universe. In the Gospels as well there are apocalyptic moments which claim to be from Jesus but which scholars now question, seeing them as reflecting the continuing apocalyptic movement in the early Jesus movement. So we must recognize that the New Testament itself is not consistent. Still we have that central core – The Word became flesh and the flesh was the flesh of a child born in deep humility and obscurity, in poverty and peril.

Is that the sign of the presence of God?

Is this one *Immanuel* – God with us?

Then what is revealed of God? God is love in all the vulnerability and precariousness of love.

Is that the way you think of God? Is that the God you worship, to whom you pray? I raise those questions because I have become quite overwhelmed with the disconnect between the Christmas revelation of God whose only mode of operation is the lure of love and our more traditional description of God using the Latin Prefix *omni* meaning “all” – omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent – oh, that is one of our favorites isn't it? Almighty God! Don't we really want the God on our side to be almighty!

In his Gifford Lectures of 1927-28, Alfred North Whitehead, one of the profound thinkers of the 20th century pointed out how the Christian movement, adopted by the Roman Empire, lost “the brief Galilean vision of humility” and, he claims, “the Church gave unto God the attributes which belonged exclusively to Caesar.” (*Process and Reality*, p. 519). I can't imagine a more concise statement of how the revelation of God in the birth of a child was turned into its opposite – a God of imperial power ruling with might.

And yet we can never feel comfortable with the God of power and might; we have a deep intuition that the Christmas revelation is true and, annually as we make our journey to Bethlehem, we know it is so. We are moved anew; we are touched in the depths of our being. Love is the creative center of Being, of reality, and love is the most potent force in the world – the lure of love beckons us to love and offer our lives to build a world where love prevails.

As we survey the human historical record, the brief Galilean vision of the Christmas child become an agent of grace, of healing and compassion, flickers pathetically in light of the brutal power moves of the caesars of this world. And yet that light has never been extinguished and over the long haul the world is moving toward more peaceful existence. If we look simply at the present, there is reason enough to despair and it seems positive movement is so painfully slow. It is tempting to yield to depression and grow bitter with cynicism. But, if we take

the long-range view over aeons of time, surely there is a movement toward the light, toward a more humane world, a world at peace.

Oh, perhaps you are thinking, “He has had too much Christmas eggnog.” Perhaps you think I’ve ceased reading the news or watching the evening news. Not so; I am sorely tempted to despair when I see the continuing tragic chess game of the world powers, jockeying for dominance, jockeying for natural resources, jockeying for theaters of control. I’m quite aware that we are at war in situations where our military leadership itself tells us the solution cannot be found militarily. I know we are as a nation in the grip of a military-industrial dominance that is secured in place by special interest; that we are becoming a plutocracy – with government by wealth for wealth; that we are polluting our earth and fouling the air – in a word, I am not unaware of the peril in which we find ourselves presently and I am not naïve to think suddenly one will arise with a magic wand.

But this too I know: two thousand years ago much of what we speak of as “the West” was ruled by imperial power and actually a rather advanced governing power – the Roman Empire. We can’t be certain of the details of the Christmas story – perhaps the edict of Caesar Augustus, the journey to Bethlehem were just that – story, to convey the connection of an ancient promise about the birth of one from the tree of Jesse, to be born in Bethlehem, with the birth of Jesus. Nonetheless, a child was born in poverty and obscurity and that child has changed the face of the earth and transformed the human story.

The mighty Empire whose edicts moved the masses under its domination eventually crucified that child that was born in Bethlehem. He had grown to maturity at a restless time in that ancient world. Apocalypticism – hopes and fears of the end of the world – was widespread. He came under the influence of a preacher named John who baptized him and he too sensed a call to call his people to repentance and faith in the God of that covenant faith. And then something happened. He sensed God calling him to bring another message – a message of grace and healing. He moved north to Galilee and created in Whitehead’s words that “brief Galilean vision”, a vision of grace and healing and compassion. Returning to Jerusalem for the observance of Passover his popularity preceded him. Empire and Temple conspired together; he was crucified and there was darkness at noon.

Ironically we call that Friday “Good”; the darkest day on the human calendar we call “Good”. Perhaps because that darkness was soon dispersed by the light of Easter – the most joyful, triumphal celebration on the Christian calendar follows hard on the heels of the darkest moment on our Christian world calendar. That’s why the Fourth Gospel relates the coming of that one into the world as the dawning of Light – light the world has never nor will ever extinguish. The eternal Word or Intention of God became enfleshed in our world history and there was grace and truth. Oh, a light too bright, a truth too telling and so the powers that

be thought to extinguish the Light by crucifying the one who embodied grace and truth that exposed their schemes of domination and brutal control.

But it didn't work, you see, for we continue to tell the story. Once every year we return to Bethlehem and the world becomes a softer place. Once every year we go to Calvary and feel the darkness and then wait for the dawning of Easter light. You see that Light will never be extinguished; that movement from the death of crucifixion to the triumph of resurrection is the last word.

And do you know why that is the case? Is it not what we are celebrating yet again? Is it not because of what we have learned at the Manger – that the presence of God in our history is, as it were, the presence of a child – vulnerable, precarious, defenseless – telling us in the revelation of Christmas that God is love.

God is love. Do you sense the radical claim we make thus? How can we get beyond all the sentimental accretions to the word Love? As I began I said, "If God is love then the source, ground and goal of reality, of all being, is love and it is the lure of love that moves creation from planets and stars to people and particles." What does that mean? Let me suggest a possibility.

Might it not mean that the creative source and center of being, of the whole of reality is love and that love keeps on giving, sustaining in existence the whole cosmic drama and will do so until love has overcome all resistance and the Kingdom of God, of love, prevails.

When will that be? We don't know for there is no predestined plan – contrary to my Calvinist forbears. Love does not control; it simply gives and gives again on behalf of the other while it is in the hands of the other to receive and secure the triumph of love or reject and seal love's tragedy. W. H. Vanstone, an Anglican priest, writes profoundly on this matter in his work, *Love's Endeavor, Love's Expense* (1977):

The power which love gives to the other is power to determine the issue of love – its completion or frustration, its triumph or tragedy. This is the vulnerability of authentic love – that it surrenders to the other power over its own issue, power to determine the triumph or the tragedy of love.

The vulnerability of God means that the issue of His love as triumph or tragedy depends upon His creation. There is given to the creation the power to determine the love of God as either triumphant or tragic love. This power may be called 'power of response': upon the response of the creation the love of God depends for its triumph or its tragedy. (p. 67)

But, in the straightforward words of St. Paul, "Love never ends." In face of every tragic rejection, love seeks out another way to overcome resistance and alienation. Love never ends.

Do you suspect I am sniffing some happy drug? No, I'm serious. Love will prevail. Think about it; two thousand years ago would anyone have believed a child born in obscurity and poverty would transform the world? One of the great accomplishments by which the Roman Empire kept the empire in hand was the Roman road system. But by land or sea, how long did it take to move from Rome to Jerusalem? And yet the Christmas child of Bethlehem rocked that empire and has forever changed life on earth. What might Jesus have accomplished with a smart phone or a Blackberry!

I'm not sure what you think of Julian Assange – well, I bet I do know! Nonetheless, whether he is a serious idealist or a dangerous anarchist, he has the empires of the world as worried as was Rome about Jesus. We are told we need the cover of secrecy to make the world work – no transparency allowed because we really don't want our scheming and conniving and manipulating exposed to the light of day. The world doesn't work that way!

But it will one day.

Because from the creative core of reality love will find a way and it will never quit until there is peace on earth, human wellbeing, global community – until the nations beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; until nation shall not lift up sword against nation, and neither shall they learn war any more. Love will not quit until the wolf and the lamb feed together and they shall not hurt or destroy in all God's holy mountain.

Why am I so certain?

Is it not because every year as we journey again to Bethlehem we really know it is true? Do we not know deep down that it is true? Love is the ultimate truth, the one cosmic absolute – our hearts tell us so.

We have the concrete instance of Jesus. Who would have believed it? Who would have wagered that that one solitary life would have greater impact than all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the kings that ever ruled or parliaments that ever sat?

It happened because the love of God found a willing envoy.

Jeremy Rifkin has written a thick volume entitled *The Empathic Civilization* in which he traces the course of human development to the present in which he challenges the long-held assumption that human beings are by nature aggressive, materialistic, utilitarian, and self-interested. He opens this large study with the scene on Flander's Field on Christmas Eve, 1914. Hellish conditions prevailed. German and English troops were dug in in trenches only 30-50 yards from each other.

The trenches were waterlogged. Soldiers shared their quarters with rats and vermin. Lacking adequate latrines, the stench of human excrement was everywhere. The men slept upright to avoid the mud and sludge of their makeshift arrangements. Dead soldiers littered the no-man's-land between opposing forces, the bodies left to rot and decompose within yards of their still-living comrades who were unable to collect them for burial.

As dusk fell over the battlefields, something extraordinary happened. The Germans began lighting candles on the thousands of small Christmas trees that had been sent to the front to lend some comfort to the men. The German soldiers then began to sing Christmas carols – first “Silent Night,” then a stream of other songs followed. The English soldiers were stunned. One soldier, gazing in disbelief at the enemy lines, said the blazed trenches looked “like the footlights of a theater.” The English soldiers responded with applause, at first tentatively, then with exuberance. They began to sing Christmas carols back to their German foes to equally robust applause.

A few men from both sides crawled out of their trenches and began to walk across the no-man's-land toward each other. Soon hundreds followed. As word spread across the front, thousands of men poured out of their trenches. They shook hands, exchanged cigarettes and cakes and showed photos of their families. They talked about where they hailed from reminisced about Christmases past, and joked about the absurdity of war.

The next morning, as the Christmas sun rose over the battlefield of Europe, tens of thousands of men – some estimates put the number as high as 100,000 soldiers – talked quietly with one another. Enemies just twenty-four hours earlier, they found themselves helping each other bury their dead comrades. More than a few pickup soccer matches were reported. Even officers at the front participated, although when the news filtered back to the high command in the rear, the generals took a less enthusiastic view of the affair. Worried that the truce might undermine military morale, the generals quickly took measures to rein in their troops. (pp. 5-6)

Fascinating true story. That's what Christmas does to us because it is true and deep down in our being we know it is true. Fortunately for the old world order of empires there were level-headed generals there who put an end to it before the Christmas truce might undermine military morale. Thus the war went on until November 1918, accounting for 8.5 million military deaths.

But it was a sign.

God is love – that is the Christmas revelation and the day is coming when that love signed in the child will prevail – Next year? Next century? Next millennium? No one knows but surely it will come for at the creative core of Being we are being lured by love and love will prevail; God will prevail and

*All will be well,
All will be well,
All manner of things will be well.*

Reference:

Jeremy Rifkin. *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis*. New York: The Penguin Group, 2009.