

During the Christmas season we're bombarded with imagery from Santa to Joseph, Mary & the baby Jesus. Thomas Kinkade paintings grace our cards. Little lambs lie with Lions. Small fat, pink cherubim float across our cards like spoiled children who've been given too much cotton candy. Love, peace, goodwill, and joy whisper to us through cards from family and friends we rarely see, or talk to. Joseph and Mary always looking serene, well kept, clean, and full of peace.

What were they thinking, Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth, Zechariah and Simeon? People like you and me, born in another time, with emotion and thought. They weren't robots living out a scripted story, speaking their lines without thought or affect on their psyche. It would seem Jesus has gotten lost in the maelstrom of sentimentality, bows & ribbons, and gift giving (Yancey, 'The Jesus I Never Knew').

Let's listen to Simeon in Luke 2:25-35 to see what he was waiting for. Think for a moment about the climate under which Christ was born.

²⁵Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. ²⁷Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

²⁹"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you now dismiss your servant in peace.

³⁰For my eyes have seen your salvation,
³¹which you have prepared in the sight of all people,

³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel."

³³The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, ³⁵so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

Jesus is rebirth. What new beginning did he bring? Let's sift through the cultural rubble & uncover Him once more! Let's consider each character of the story.

Mary, a teenage bride to be, betrothed to a man she'd not yet 'been with'. Today a teenage pregnancy - tragic yes, unheard of no. Tragic, but not cause for death under the law. We've lost sight of the fear this young girl felt bearing that distended belly for all to see. "Who's the father?" everyone's asking, "That little harlot, who does she think she's kidding with stories of angels and the Messiah!" Couldn't you see the fat old Jewish women gathered around their front doors as she waddles by, whispering, and gossiping? "I'll bet you it was so and so, I saw her touch his arm once I knew right then, something's up." Imagine them going indoors telling their Jewish ruling husbands to do

something about this degrading little girl. “Stone her, that’s what the law says right? Stone her!”

The shameful sin of pregnancy outside of marriage is an impossibility to hide in a small village. The Scriptures say she was greatly troubled, afraid & confused.

Consider Joseph, a young man, betrothed to this girl. A girl he probably loved and wanted to marry. Now, in a small village where even the most mundane news spreads by lunchtime, his fiancé is pregnant; how fast do you think that news traveled? What suffering of mind he must’ve endured before the angel visited him. Thoughts of her infidelity flooding his thinking. Running over in his mind all the men in town, trying to figure out who it was who betrayed him with his fiancé. A thousand scenarios rolling through his brain. Imagine the shame his family felt; the weight he bore for this out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Then, he’s confronted in a dream by an angel, and turns to protect his young bride. A fish against the flow; a young man fighting the wisdom of elders and a whole town! Arguing for his bride he must’ve felt he was taking on the world in a society where decisions were made by consensus!

The male head of a household would’ve been sufficient to report for the Roman census. Author, Philip Yancey, asks, did he take Mary to Bethlehem to birth the child away from the watchful stares of hatred in Nazareth? Probably.

They were poor; wealth would’ve found a room in Bethlehem that night. When they consecrated Jesus, they gave only the most meager sacrifice. Imagine the cold night air in the stable/cave, the stench and unsanitary conditions. Imagine the fear a young couple would have giving birth to their first child in such conditions. Life was not great for Joseph & Mary. In contrast, Elizabeth’s pregnancy was probably celebrated by the whole town. She was an old woman, barren for so long. Contrast that to the birth of Jesus in a stable & Mary shunned by everyone around her. Yancey says this, “Nine months of awkward explanations, the lingering scent of scandal – it seems that God arranged the most humiliating circumstances possible for his entrance, as if to avoid any charge of favoritism.” (*The Jesus I Never Knew*, p32) Jesus grew up under a cloud of questionable paternity. In modern day America, a girl claiming to be pregnant & seeing angels, would’ve had her child taken away. She’d be considered a psychiatric liability to the child! Yancey states that Mary, and I would add her husband, were the first to accept Jesus at the cost of their own reputations and comfort.

Zechariah and Elizabeth are overjoyed, finally having the child they’ve longed for. Although confused and pensive about what was unfolding; an angel, a son who’d pave the way for the Lord!? What’s it mean!?! The buzz they must’ve felt when Mary arrived and they further understand what’s happening! The confusion & excitement causing sleepless nights.

Then we have Simeon who’s not been privy to all this until the day the boy is brought to the Temple. We don’t know much about the man other than he was devout, righteous,

filled with the Spirit, and must've been faithful given his long devotion. It'd been revealed to him that he wouldn't die before he'd seen the Lord's Christ.

Imagine telling others you'd been told that you wouldn't die until the Messiah comes? What a way to win friends and influence people – the guy was probably considered a nut. God hadn't spoken for 400 years, what would make this guy think he could hear from God? In the end Simeon seems, to be the clearest voice of prophecy about this child. He not only sees the joy, but the pain it will cause as well. He says, 'This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, ³⁵so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.' We have the benefit of looking back on this event having seen his words come to fruition.

All of these people find themselves, not only in personal difficulties, but also in societal & political positions of trying times for the people of Israel. Jesus is born under the rule of Caesar Augustus, the same ruler who had coined the term 'Good News' or 'Gospel' for his own government. He was regarded as deity; rites of worship had been established for him. His rule was thought to be the 'Good News' or 'Gospel', the final solution to peace and order for the world; it was believed to be an unending empire. And, just like the cosmic battle between the name of God and Pharaoh in Egypt, there's going to be an upset to Caesar's rule. God will undo and surpass the rule of Caesar Augustus. The word 'Gospel' would be usurped to mean the rule of Christ, robbing Caesar of his glory and giving it rightly to Jesus! Augustus would hardly be mentioned, only once to set the date of Christ's entrance into the world (Yancey).

Jesus was also born under the local rule of Herod, that despicable despot who killed two brothers-in-law, his own wife, and two of his very own sons. The man who ordered the massacre of all first born male Jewish children in fear of this coming 'Jewish King'. He even rounded up innocent citizens five days before his death, ordering them to be executed the day he died to insure proper mourning on the day of his demise. A great image of the Kingdom of the World wielding its power by the sword, in contrast to, the Kingdom of God wielding its power through love, forgiveness, and peace.

A peaceful revolution had come in Jesus; the redemption of Israel at hand! In his infant days, Jesus spent his time as a refugee in Egypt, living life under Roman oppression. Divinity, unafraid to enter a world of violence & hatred as the God-man. In the end, Rome thinks it had put an end to any threat by crucifying Jesus. However, they didn't realize that by doing so, they'd broken the power of winter's hold on the hearts of men. Like Aslan said in C.S. Lewis's 'Chronicles of Narnia', they didn't realize the deep magic of the Kingdom of God; unwittingly they'd taken part in ushering in the next chapter of the forever rule of God in Creation.

At the time Jews longed for the days of Solomon when he'd made silver as numerous as stones on the ground. They longed to be free from Roman oppression! Yet here we have the Messiah, born in a stable with animals & dirty shepherds, the menial and despised as witness; he's certainly the God of the voiceless & oppressed. God made approachable in the form of a baby dependent on two poor back-country teenagers.

Herod and Caesar struck fear by the sword; they say not a day passed without an execution under Herod's rule. Yet, God came in the least threatening form he could; the Kingdom of the World in contrast again to the Kingdom of God. And then, after a few years, three 'unclean' foreign gentile kings come to worship him. Three kings who undermined Herod to worship Jesus; the revolution had begun!

Everything about his birth was shrouded in tension, and contradiction to Messianic expectations. Even his Aramaic language wasn't fit for a king of the Jews; it was too linked to those 'dirty' Gentile nations. He hails from Nazareth, the backwards town in Galilee, known for insurrection. The Pax Romana, or Peace of Rome, was the reigning thought. Jews splintered into various groups to deal with Roman oppression and Hellenization; Zealots, Sadducees, Sanhedrin, Pharisees, and Essenes, all with different ways of dealing with the harsh political climate, some violent, some pacifist, and some compromising.

This also follows the Maccabean revolt which lasted almost a century prompted by Antiochus when he'd tried to get young Jewish males to reverse their circumcision in order to be able to participate in Greek athletic events. He entered the Temple, into the Holy of Holies, at what became known as the 'Abomination of Desolation', sacrificing a pig to Zeus on the alter of God, and smeared the room with it's blood. Violence broke out and it took Rome thirty years to squash the rebellion finally installing Herod as their own 'King of the Jews' - a title Jesus would also usurp.

Just before Jesus' birth, from 67-37bc, no less than 150,000 men perished in Palestine due to uprisings (William Barclay). Jesus birth came at a chaotic and dangerous time. And, God enters history placing himself in the hands of two Jewish teenagers from Galilee; doesn't seem like a wise move to start a revolution.

In the midst of all this, there's one man, faithfully waiting to see the promised Messiah. When the parents bring Jesus to the Temple, he cradles the Creator in his arms:

²⁹"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
 you now dismiss your servant in peace.
³⁰For my eyes have seen your salvation,
 ³¹which you have prepared in the sight of all people,
^{32a}a light for revelation to the Gentiles
 and for glory to your people Israel."

In the 'Chronicles of Narnia', C.S. Lewis paints a picture of a land always under the rule of winter; never Christmas. I hate winter. I tried to get my wife to move to Arizona when we returned from Indonesia, but she'd have nothing to do with it; I succumbed for the love of my beautiful wife, she's much more important than my need for constant heat. Winter's dark, cold, no leaves or greenery, you get fat and lazy, everything seems dead. Don't like it. Maybe it's why Lewis uses the imagery; winter is like being under the power of death. I like sunshine, springtime, flowers, greenery, birds, and seeing people outside. Spring is rebirth.

Imagine the winter the Jews felt under the Holocaust. The long dark days under Nazi rule; death, fear & hopelessness. When the war ended, the Nazi's defeated, Hitler dead; they must've felt like it was springtime.

Imagine the winter the Americans felt in captivity for 444 days in Iran under the Ayatollah Khomeini. Long days, hopelessness, facing death daily. Imagine their release, stepping off the plane, home again with family and friends; that must've been springtime, a rebirth.

Imagine the winter women must've felt in America, unable to vote and participate, relegated only to the kitchen, wearing only aprons, never a doctors coat; never feeling they had a voice. Recent changes in attitudes and law must've been springtime to them.

Imagine the winter African Americans must've felt for so many years under the tyranny of white America. People unable to participate, treated like dogs, maimed, burned, murdered, deprived of rights & serving the whims of white oppressors. When Martin Luther King showed up peacefully reversing laws, it must have been like springtime for them.

We must acknowledge, remnants of winter remain. We saw it in Connecticut last week; death & evil seem to have a stranglehold on creation. Winter, at some level, remains for African Americans despite progress. Remnants of winter still remain for women, children, and all of us in some aspect in the world. Yet although we experience this winter, the snow is melting away.

Lewis wrote the Chronicles of Narnia after WWII between 1949-54. Some say it reflected the winter of Nazi rule. But timeless literature speaks not only of a story that may relate to the current times of the author, but also to the deeper struggles of the human condition. Simeon felt the winter of Roman rule, but the Jews also felt the winter of being under the Law. The weight of their sin and inability to satisfy the Law's requirements. If they pointed their finger at Rome, 3 fingers pointed back. How cruel were the Romans? How cruel were the Jews in return? The Jews under the winter of Roman rule, and the winter of fallen human nature.

We all feel the winter of a chaotic world, as well as the winter of our fallen nature. We struggle to walk with Jesus in worship, purity, and joy. We've found the beginnings of springtime in Jesus; a rebirth - and like infants onto adulthood, we're growing spiritually. When rumor of Aslan's coming was afoot snow began melting around Narnia. The grass started to peek out from the ice, buds appeared, buttercups unfolded to face the warming sun! It's what happens to us in Jesus. Positionally we are made righteous, yet there's a remnant of winter, little by little it's melting away, life is being renewed. Simeon sang, seeing that spring had come in the baby he held in his arms. He sees clouds parting, rays warming the earth, the sun of righteousness come as prophesied in Malachi; a rebirth.

Simeon, like Zechariah, knew of the promise of God. The oath God swore to Abraham; the promised Messiah throughout Scripture. A promise of 'light for revelation to the Gentiles,' revealing his understanding - Messiah was for all people, stretching beyond the cultural borders of Israel, offered to all nations. The same promise to Abraham that he'd be a blessing to all nations. Simeon knows this Davidic King will rule with love, peace, and forgiveness forever. He also knows that we fight the remnants of winter; the Kingdom has come, but hasn't yet fully come. We're new creations in Christ, the old has gone the new has come, but in this interim time we still battle sinful nature in a hostile world. Yet, the kingdom of peace will be established fully.

What Simeon had patiently waited for came about; the fulfillment of God's promise. The Messiah, the Holy One of God; the Second Adam who'd offer forgiveness of sin, like Zechariah prophesied just a chapter earlier in Luke. This Messiah brings peace, but not in the way they'd expected. Jesus, through death & resurrection, ushered in a new covenant with his people. Herod and Rome crushed with the sword, Christ brings peace in sacrifice; redemption found in the promise of God and rebirth through reconciliation with God.

But peace doesn't come without suffering; without a sifting of our hearts:

"This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, ³⁵so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

We stand, not only on the other side of this prophecy, but in the midst of it. Jesus has been crucified, Mary's soul has been pierced seeing her own son brutally murdered. But the Gospel goes on, Jesus has risen, the eternal rule of the Davidic King still stands. Jesus, sifting hearts, looking for those who'll say, "I now understand Christmas, it's not Thomas Kinkade paintings, or fat overfed cherubim, not even family and friends. Christmas is a bloody birth into a violent world; an infant King, bringing peace to our hearts by sacrifice; it's reconciliation with God & restoration of creation. Jesus, a new beginning, a rebirth!" In this baby, cradled in the arms of an old prophet, the world finds the Song of Redemption and Rebirth in peace with God.

How does Jesus bring a new beginning? Through Word, Spirit & Church. No one will see him if he's kept hidden. He was born in an open stable, let's keep that tradition alive. The life of Jesus in his people, loving through sacrifice in a hostile world. People who, like Simeon, willingly hold up salvation on the open steps of community and proclaim that peace & salvation has come in Jesus. A new beginning, a rebirth.

I was at the Ardmore Initiative Christmas party this past week. Many major community leaders present. Many of them thanked me for Six:Eight and what we do in this community. They view us, after 4 years, the place to go to for those hurting in our community. They trust us, and I was able to speak openly about the Gospel to quite a few of them - that's melting the snow away!

What has the Holy Spirit done in you this year? What about 2013? How will we experience & extend Jesus' message of hope and rebirth to our neighbors?

Merry Christmas - Merry, bloody, dirty, despised, undermining the worlds order, sacrificial, freeing, wonderful, glorious Christmas...may God be praised! There is rebirth & new beginning in Jesus, let's continue to bring that to our community in 2013!