

Alas to Hallelujah

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Isaiah 9:1-9

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Have you ever noticed how special days, like Christmas, are more connected to other Christmases than they are to the day or the week before? What I mean is that if I were to mention December 12th to you, unless that is your birthday or has some other special significance to you, you probably don't instantly think of other December 12ths. You probably can't remember who you were with and what you did on December 12th 2005, again unless it is a special day for you. Regular days are not connected to the past or the future the way that a special day like Christmas is.

That was one of the brilliant parts about the story *A Christmas Carol*. Remember how Scrooge is visited by the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future? Through these visits Scrooge is brought back to how Christmas used to be when he was young. He is also brought into a fuller understanding of the present Christmas and into a possible tragic Christmas of the future if things don't change. These ghosts of Christmas past, present and future were sent to help Scrooge change and heal and to help him discover the true spirit of Christmas through the joy of generosity and sharing and love.

We too can be haunted by the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future. But because it doesn't happen for us in the dramatic, chain-rattling style that Scrooge experienced it, we don't notice it or learn from it. But we can be oppressed by it. Dwelling on Christmases of the past, or expectations for today's Christmas or fears about tomorrow's Christmas can prevent us from experiencing the true meaning and spirit of Christmas.

Because Christmas is connected in our minds and hearts to other Christmases we can't help but think of other Christmases we've had and it's not always helpful. Perhaps you are reminded of how good Christmas used to be when you were young. Or of what it was like when that special person was still alive, the family was still together and getting along or when you had more money coming in and could afford more. Or maybe past Christmases bring up memories of a dysfunctional family and a series of dysfunctional Christmases.

The ghost of Christmas present keeps us running around trying to live up to everyone's expectations and get everything done on time. We are pressured to spend too much money thinking that others will be happier and Christmas will be better if we do. The whole commercialism of Christmas annoys us and yet we still get sucked into the vortex of it.

And then there is the ghost of Christmas future. Baseball Hall of Fame catcher, Lawrence "Yogi" Berra, once remarked, "The future ain't what it used to be." Especially if this Christmas is not like it used to be, or if Christmas reminds you of difficulties in your family or of loved ones who are gone, often leading up to Christmas there is great stress and fear of how bad and lonely and depressing it *might* be. With grief, people often have a harder time in the days leading up to the anniversary of the loss of a loved one than they do on the anniversary itself. They dread the day coming but the actual day doesn't tend to be as bad. That's how Christmas can be for many, the days leading up can be worse than the actual day.

I love the scripture that we read earlier from Isaiah 9. It is so profound and such a reminder of what this time of the year is really about.

It begins:

But those who have suffered will no longer be in pain. The territories of Zebulun and Naphtali in Galilee were once hated. But this land of the Gentiles across the Jordan River and along the Mediterranean Sea will be greatly respected.

Only a few years before the Assyrian army had ravaged and conquered the territories of Zebulun and Naphtali. We think we have troubles. But this was a group of people who knew the horrors of war, who had experienced drought and famine. Apart from family there was no social safety net. I can't help but think the people Haiti would understand the kind of oppression, the kind of darkness that Isaiah 9 talks about.

Those who walked in the dark have seen a bright light. And it shines upon everyone who lives in the land of darkest shadows. ... You have broken the power of those who abused and enslaved our people. You have rescued them just as you saved your people from Midian.

And what was the source of the light?

For unto us a child is born.

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Years ago Bret Harte wrote a short story titled "The Luck of Roaring Camp." It is a story about a baby who made a difference. Roaring Camp was supposedly the roughest mining camp in the West. It was notorious for its murderous fights, thefts, and drunkenness. The miners of Roaring Creek were a tough bunch. The only woman there was a Native American, Cherokee Sal, and she died in childbirth. The baby survived and was quite healthy. The miners, however, were faced with quite a dilemma. What were they going to do with a baby? They made a crib out of an old box lined with dirty rags. The box was not good enough or clean enough to hold a baby. A cradle was purchased from a town 80 miles away, and they placed the baby in it. Beautiful blankets were brought in from Sacramento and placed in the cradle. The miners noticed that the shack where the baby was kept was filthy, so they washed the floor, walls, and ceiling. Nice curtains were installed on the windows. Life began to change in Roaring Creek. The brutality ceased. Every day the baby was taken to the entrance of the mine so that all the miners could watch the baby's growth. The miners decided the entrance to the mine was ugly, so they planted a beautiful garden there. These hardened men loved to touch and hold and play with the baby, but their hands were dirty. Soon the general store sold out of soap. Life in Roaring Camp had completely changed because of a baby. These hardened miners gave up their nasty, profane ways -- all for the love of a baby!

Christmas is about a profound hope that the son of God has come into the world and because of that fact everything changes. If you haven't experienced that change in your life then open your heart and invite Jesus to come into it. Your life will change with Jesus in it. You'll find you want to clean yourself up and make the world a more beautiful place for the sake of the wonderful love that lives in you. If you are haunted at Christmas by regrets of what *used* to be or by stresses about what *should* be or fears about what *might* be, then it is time that you take a trip to the manger and pick up and hold the baby. There's a Christmas song that I love called "Nothing but a child". The chorus goes like this:

*Nothing but a child could wash these tears away
Or guide a weary world into the light of day
And nothing but a child could help erase these miles
So once again we all can be children for awhile.*

You know what your triggers are when it comes to the things that bother you or get you down at Christmas. Do your best to avoid or change it, whether it's self pity, regret, loneliness or commercialism or something else. But remember that even though our celebration of Christmas is far from perfect...perhaps far from what it should be, you can still find the Christ child in it. Jesus was born to bring light to the darkness in this world and the darkness in your life. Pick up the child and bring him into your heart today and the strangest thing will happen. You'll not only have him inside, you'll see signs of him everywhere you go. Your "alas" will turn to "Hallelujah!"

Take a look at how this ordinary scene was transformed:

(If you have access to the Internet I encourage you to watch this singing of the Hallelujah chorus in a shopping mall food court) (Here is the link) http://www.youtube.com/watch_popup?v=SXh7JR9oKVE&vq=medium#t=49

May all your Christmases, and all your memories of Christmas, be transformed by the loving touch of the infant son of God.

Amen.