

## WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

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I learned the true meaning of Christmas on a wintry night in Minnesota a few years ago.

Now I would guess that you are already three steps ahead of me and are expecting to hear a tender story about the kindness of strangers, goodness where none might have been possible, and key roles played by children and elderly folks living alone. For those elements typically figure into a story that begins as I began this morning, talking about the “true meaning of Christmas.”

But this will not be such a story, because I am not persuaded that the “true meaning of Christmas” comes through fully in tender stories with children and elderly people and kindness, however warm those stories may be. The “true meaning of Christmas” is far more complex than kindness alone, or than good-hearted strangers alone, or than scenes of children and elderly people can convey. Christmas is a complicated time of year, a holiday with multiple levels of meaning, most of which are not captured in Santas and shopping and lawn displays of colored lights. To have the power the holiday has demonstrated over time, to move us the way the traditions and stories do, the “true meaning of Christmas” will need to be strange,

somewhat upsetting, paradoxical, able to defy our expectations. We tend to forget or slide past what is easy and predictable; it is the troubling truth, the insight that does not fit into our usual structures of meaning, that sticks with us.

Back to my story: on that wintry night when I learned the true meaning of Christmas, I found myself driving home, after having dinner with a friend, in a world that seemed not to be governed by the usual laws of gravity, or cause and effect, or any of those comforting and reliable supports. For one thing, this world was coated with a smooth, glittering, treacherous layer of ice. Once I embarked across that ice coating, my car ceased to respond in its customary fashion. When I tried to brake it to a stop, it kept moving; when I steered it in one direction, the car headed in an opposite direction. Before I had driven very far, I realized that ice had effected a suspension of law and order, and my car could now do as it pleased. I had no control over it, over myself, over the other drivers struggling with their own wayward cars, over anything in the icy, random, lawless world into which I ventured that night.

Such was my introduction to the perilous side of winter. As a native Texan, I had not before that night encountered a world of ice. And ever thereafter, I have been terrified of being in such an icy setting again, so much so that I refused to leave home when ice was in the forecast, I tensed

up whenever I saw or felt ice on the ground where I walked, and I finally relocated to southern California where ice on the roads is an unknown weather phenomenon, hallelujah.

That experience of driving on ice marked me so because I count on my world to be orderly and law-abiding. I need to know the ground rules in situations, want my expectations of what will happen to be more or less confirmed. I enjoy feeling secure, knowing that things are under control, that someone is in charge (preferably me).

All of which explains why I felt terrified that wintry night when the world was revealed to me as a disorderly, unpredictable reality that refuses to be confined within any legalistic boundaries, however sophisticated they may be. Though I, like many people, typically perceive myself and all about me functioning in accordance with certain laws, those ever-so-apparent laws do not necessarily have any relation to the reality they supposedly govern. In the wild, icy world of my night drive, nothing could be controlled, no one was in charge—or, to state it positively, everything was absolutely free. And freedom can be a terrifying experience.

Christmas represents another of those spaces in the flow of time when laws are suspended and controls become irrelevant. During the Christmas season, most of us give and receive and spend and eat and celebrate and

otherwise behave in ways that flaunt the usual order directing our lives. The craziness in which we indulge at Christmastime is tolerable because we know it will not last forever. “Christmas comes only once a year,” we say, and proceed to act with abandon, counting on December 26 to pull us back in line and restore order to the chaotic Christmas world. The controls are lifted for a brief time—and then firmly, reassuringly reinstated. Back on the diet, back on schedule, back on the exercise program, back to being thrifty, back to business as usual.

“Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain” (Isaiah 40:4). That ancient prophecy, recalled by later Biblical authors of the Christmas story as a prediction pointing to the birth of Jesus, describes the sort of reversals and suspensions of the usual order that have been associated with Christmas night from the outset. When the long-awaited messiah arrives, laws will be broken; in fact, the entire structure of reality will be changed. Along with the central event of Christmas, the birth of Jesus, comes a host of departures from the ordinary: a virgin conceives; an unusually bright star stands fixed over a stable; shepherds see a sky full of angels singing; three men of royalty undergo the hazards of a long journey to deliver gifts to a peasant child; wolves and lambs, lions and calves, savage

beasts and tame beasts lie down together. Whatever controls are usually in force, moving life in a predictable pattern, disappear with the arrival of Jesus.

Not everyone who experiences this new, strangely disordered world finds it a pleasurable experience, which may be why we sing “the hopes *and fears* of all the years are met in thee tonight.” The keeper of the inn at Bethlehem, for instance, insists on maintaining the usual order and clings to it so tightly that he simply cannot –or will not—find room in his inn for Joseph and Mary when they come seeking a place for their child to be born. To abandon all the rules and open himself and his life to this new thing which appears at his door is too threatening for the innkeeper. You have heard the argument before, perhaps even used it yourself: no, I can’t ignore the rules, I just can’t. It would be too disruptive. Besides, if I let you in, others will come along like you and expect to be admitted, too. If I change my policy for you, I’ll have to change it for everyone—and that’s asking too much. No, no room here.

Perhaps the most notorious resistance to the random, unpredictable state of affairs that accompanies the birth of Jesus comes from Herod, king of Judea. As his advisors warn him, this child will turn things upside down, shatter Herod’s carefully established controls, transform the whole social

and political and religious order. The possibility that the changes set in motion by Jesus might be an improvement over the present reality makes no difference; Herod is intent on preserving the familiar, trusted system of controls. His response to news of the child's birth: kill all the male children of Bethlehem and, with luck, Jesus among them. Stamp out this new thing before it grows any further. Keep the world and myself as they are—at all costs.

Life through the eyes of a child looks very different from the same life seen through the eyes of an adult. For the child, anything and everything is possible (at least until some adult comes along to declare it impossible). Controls, rules, boundaries: those are all distant, almost meaningless realities rooted in the adult world. The child's world has no such order, for its central principle is freedom. From where a child stands, it is impossible to predict what will happen; like my car and I on an icy roadway, like the new reality inaugurated by Jesus' birth, all that happens in a child's world arises spontaneously, moves about in a random fashion, disappears without warning in a fluid, kaleidoscopic, ever-changing swirl. To an adult standing outside, peering into the world of childhood, such an unbounded, disorderly, absolutely free reality can look terrifying. How can one plan, act responsibly, trust in a situation where all is possible? Yet the Christmas

story focuses on a child, claims that in some mysterious way God is present in a child, urges us to ponder that mystery and find in it a central truth for our lives. And in keeping with the events of the Christmas story, that truth is likely to upend our expectations completely.

As I learned while struggling to drive on an icy roadway, as the Christmas images of paradox and contradiction suggest, controls and rules are vital to our functioning—but they also make it difficult for us to change, to operate in any but our customary fashion. Laws that govern the world's and our behavior satisfy our need for some structure, some order—but they exclude far more reality than they ever contain. That my reactions and those of others can be predicted is reassuring—but predictability leaves no room for the new, exciting, transforming possibility. So roads must be straightened and mountains leveled off to make room for more space, more possibility, more reality.

“Unless you become as little children, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.” I subsequently learned from veteran winter drivers that the key to negotiating an icy road is letting up on the controls, even driving opposite to the way one has been taught. Unless we let go some of our controls, unless we stop braking and steering so hard, we cannot drive in ice or adapt to new situations or grow beyond the present boundaries of self, of world, of

comfort zone. Unless we stop resisting the flow of life, we risk becoming as hard and unyielding as a rock in a stream, never penetrated by the rich life that pours around us, slowly being eroded and broken down through the years. Unless we learn to open the tight circle of self to the new possibility that Christmas represents, we are destined to spend our days as Herod, fearful of threats to our carefully controlled empire, refusing to allow the birth of new ideas, new ways of functioning, new truths, until all newness is eliminated and like the firstborn children of Bethlehem, we die away.

For all my precautions and careful planning, I was not able to forever avoid driving in icy weather during my years in Minnesota. Through the course of winter, the ongoing cycle of snowfall and snow melt creates ice in all sorts of places, sometimes visible, sometimes not. I did learn, when I encountered those unexpected icy patches, to resist the automatic tendency to slam on the brakes and clench the steering wheel, to instead brake lightly, downshift, ease up on the steering wheel, forget the roadway and head for the curb. Those ice-driving lessons came to serve me well in all sorts of situations where my first instinct is to assert control, and where doing so only makes matters worse. I suspect that learning to lift control, to let go, will be a lifelong challenge, something I will have to experience again and again and only gradually, by degrees, come to master (if I ever do). That I

chose to leave a California climate where ice is unknown and come back to the Midwest where dealing with ice is most certainly a regular part of the winter experience, suggests that I grew ready for another round of challenges to control. That I am choosing now to permanently relocate to Detroit if you call me as your next settled minister, that I am eager to take on the work of building this church with you, even in a time of controversy and turmoil, perhaps means that not only have I become skilled at driving in ice but have actually come to enjoy unpredictability, times of skidding about, learning to let go.

The true meaning of Christmas is a meaning that can take a lifetime to absorb and understand, for it runs so very much against all the training we receive growing up and in our work and from our culture. We get an opportunity to experience that meaning every year, but it comes with countermessages of reassurance: we are urged to spend and race about, all the while hearing that this way of being is only temporary. We can indulge safely, since this will not last.

So what are we waiting for? Come on, throw caution to the winds, get into the Christmas spirit, do the unpredictable, look for the unexpected, be open to surprise. Christmas comes but once a year, so we can afford to let go—but look out. The narrators of the Christmas story warned that the

upsets which came with the birth of Jesus would not stop, but were only the first chapter in an ongoing revolution. Driving on ice changed me irrevocably, for I had never had such a clear lesson in loss of control. Let Christmas into your life, and you never know what might happen. Of course, not knowing what might happen is the whole point. Never could I have imagined, when I finally reached home that night and collapsed in a heap inside my front door, that a drive on ice would in time lead me to fall in love, or have a child, or move to southern California, or seek a call from a Detroit area church, all changes that felt just like the wild, out of control experience of driving on ice. If you choose this year to abandon yourself to Christmas, to let go of your usual life and see what happens, then do let us know where you end up. We may, just may, want to join you in that scary, wonderful, Christmastime freedom, surprise, transformation, and richness beyond compare.