



The Gospel of Christmas: Reflections for Advent

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God Was Actually Born

Ever since I became a Christian a dozen years ago, I have been gripped by the urge to write in the weeks before Christmas. Sometimes a phrase in a carol seizes me. Or I get to wondering about some intriguing aspect of the Christmas story—the idea that God himself passed through a human birth canal or that a mucky feed trough cradled his newborn body. Most Christmases, when I hear the account of the nativity read in church, I’m surprised by a detail that I never noticed before, even though I have studied the various passages closely for years.

This Christmas, I noticed that as the wise men were following the star, they were suddenly “overjoyed” (in my translation of the Bible) to see it. Their response seemed meaningful somehow—as if they had perhaps lost sight of the star for a while and were worried that it might have disappeared for good—and I wanted to write about it.

The Christmas mandates of our culture—shopping for presents, sending cards, making gingerbread houses and doing other elaborate Christmas crafts with my children—sometimes overwhelm me, and writing about them serves as an outlet for stress. Often, in the weeks leading up to Christmas, traumatic events of past Christmases revisit me and the jolliness of Christmas seems a burden. And so I write, and the resulting essays go into a computer file labeled “Advent.”

The chapters in this book are taken from that Advent file. They are not the final word on the accounts of the birth of Jesus in the Bible, of course. I get some things wrong, I’m sure. I also read differently than a real theologian is likely to read—more speculatively, certainly, and more in the context of my own experience. In my view, God’s coming to us in the form of a human baby, if it really is the good news the angel says it is, must be good and relevant not just to those shepherds who first heard it proclaimed but to me, today, in the world I live in. So I tell it that way: as not only God’s story but my own, the story of his advent into my life.

—From the preface