

Darkness and light

Christmas stories are our favourite stories to tell. They involve all the good emotions - they engage all the senses. For this is one of those seasons that sees families finding their way to common ground. Introductions are made; apologies accepted; gifts are exchanged; food shared.

Most families have their favourite Christmas stories about themselves; “remember the first Christmas with the grandkids... remember the year that the cat ran off with the turkey? Or the year that the flights were delayed, (etc). You know what I mean.

The stories we love to tell find expression in movies and art and song too - and the general feeling is always the same: Crisis gets in the way of the “perfect” Christmas - something comes up that points people to the “real” spirit of the season - suddenly realize what a gift that this (strange situation) is - another happy Christmas ending.

The first story seems to roll out like that.

Back and forth go the gospels - well, Luke and Matthew - breaking news of impending birth; Elizabeth and Zechariah; Mary, and then Mary’s husband-to-be. Each gets news in an unusual way - news that suggests whatever their plans might have been, God has altered them. Joseph’s story uses words like righteousness and public disgrace. These two notions don’t rest comfortably together, and Joseph’s dream is an unsettling moment.

Now to his credit, Joseph wakes up a changed man. No more talk of dismissal or disgrace. The marriage proceeds - a child is born - his story seems destined to be of the ‘happy ending’ kind...but in the meantime...

This is a story of twists and turns. A story of despotic leaders with dangerous ideas; a story of cruel justice and great suffering; a story of untimely death and lost hope. All of this is bound up in that first Christmas story - and of course, there is a plot twist so fantastic that it is almost unbelievable. This is the story of stories that is at the heart of every other story. The struggle between darkness and light.

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All of my favourite fiction has this struggle at its centre. The work of Tolkien, JK Rowling, George Lucas (yes I have seen the new Star Wars film. No I won't tell you about it) all find their motivation in a struggle to overcome some sort of darkness. The light is often elusive and hard to see. The darkness often seems like the more powerful character. The journey of the light through the darkness is perilous. The light almost always seems to be extinguished at some point. But this metaphor is so powerful and so deeply ingrained in our being that we know what will happen. We know there will be a 'final grand encounter' and that the light will prevail.

So it is with this story - the Christmas story.

The cruelty of societal judgement - the first, harsh assessment of a worried "righteous" man will not prevail. The cold manipulations of government bureaucrats that see families displaced and barns turned into maternity wards make the story sound more real to us.

These perilous human experiences give us access to God because God is found in the midst of them; new-born, vulnerable, and beautiful in the way that all new and delicate beings are beautiful.

This is THE story from which all our stories take their form. Full of challenge and unlikely triumph. And it starts with a dream

It starts with the prophet's dream, the promise of hope - light to those in darkness...and the story seems to tell itself. The metaphor is timeless, and the birth of the Saviour is both the beginning and the end of the story. This hope is renewed each time we tell the story - each time we light a candle - each time we share a gift, or sit at table. The story is for all time, this story of God's journey with us through darkness to light. God is the light towards which we travel. God is also our gentle, constant travelling companion. In Jesus, God is with us. Always.