

WATCHING & WAITING  
THE STAR AND THE CROSS

Texts on Christmas Eve 2013

“Wishing you an old-fashioned Christmas”—jingles the message inside a yuletide card on my desk. The water-color painting printed on its face renders a scene in a room of very blue walls and very high ceiling. The tall be-appld Christmas tree stands on top of a dining table. In separate chairs, mother and father are occupied with their books. (*Books?* you say. Ah, but this is an “old-fashioned” Christmas.) Three dogs cavort among three children, three toys, and three cats in front of a fireplace so huge a man could walk in it but for the roaring fire climbing up in it. Through sixteen uncurtained window panes, the night imposes a part of its immense burden on the domestic scene, which seems to push with all its might against that dark. This little painting works a wonderful Christmas spell.

What is it about an old-fashioned Christmas that so draws us to its warm hearth? And what is it about our modern Christmas frenzy and that marshmallow music in the malls that lays waste to a Christmas deeply dreamt? All sorts of answers come: commercialism, materialism, a false sense of history, withering family traditions, forgetting of life’s enjoyments, and so on. These probes are not exactly wrong, but they don’t go deep; they only name symptoms of a social problem. The heart of that problem appears on the other side of those sixteen glass panes partly admitting the dark in the little painting.

Christmas only “works” if its lights play against real dark. That is why, according to Christmas cards and carols unnumbered, “the snow lay on the ground, the stars shone bright.” The snow, the cold, and the dark do not direct our thoughts to history, but rather our hearts to a mystery—that over against a darkness unwilling to dicker death with us, light shines.

The drama is universal and personal. In *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens masterfully manipulated metaphors of light against real darkness—the brilliant spirits coming at midnight to show hateful or hopeful pasts and futures; the bright good will in the Cratchit family set against its poverty and the threat to tiny Tim’s life; and, of course, Scrooge by night and Scrooge by Christmas Day. Personal confrontation with forces of evil and destruction is the first fact of the story of our life. This is why even a little dab of dark in a water-colored window is dark enough to make a real Christmas present—to show that a “light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” Ask anyone whose Christmas was once infused with fear for a loved one’s life, whether that season bore a new measure of the meaning of Christmas. If there came some light in that darkness, the great glad tidings tell.

If you marvel at children's edgeless zeal for this season, only remember that their whole lives are plunged in elements of weakness and uncertainty. Though mostly not burdened with this thought, they know from the marrow of their bones that this world is armed to crush whatever little life moves unprotected in its paths. A child's dazzlement at Christmas is her shout of joy absolute that there exist great powers who shelter me, a little lamb, in the middle of the world's storm, shepherds who supply my need and more. That attitude, that prayer—which is the essence of true religiousness—brings peace to any child of any age from one to one-oh-two—yet only if life's light and shadow are somehow held near in mind, in honesty, and not denied.

The problem with modern Christmas is plain: Denial! Too much light, and no darkness in which to wonder at it. The secular songs are merely cheery. The stars . . . are Hollywood stars set up on man-made stages. The malls glow too bright. The gift-giving business, often a burden, is too light a thing to touch "the hopes and fears of all the years . . . met in Thee tonight." To say it too plainly, Americans dreaming of a white Christmas will never rest in peace while their light, bright, white dream is still driven by denial of all the wrongs in our long history, our hate and racism, our wars, our greed.

But Christmas wasn't for denial. The story of the baby born at night was never meant for merriment alone. I often wonder as I wander among the gospels whether it was the sign of the Cross that first brought the idea of a westward leading star to a gospel-sayer's eye and helped him shape his story. For without the Cross, we can never find the Babe. Without the Cross, the Star leads nowhere but to another birth, glad or sad, long or short, then done and dead. The Cross is our star, our guide, our surety, our light through storm and evil, and finally, our joy and our hope; that light by which we may see and say at once all that we have done and not done; that light under which we can hold and be held in solidarity with all whom we have done ill, with all the crucified peoples of the world, even the dead, and all their children. The Cross has the light we must follow, the light which "yonder star" but dimly foreshadows. By this sign, hidden and holy, we can without the least self-consciousness become like children again, ready to receive all the fabled stories of this night as children do, as Christmas Presence, spread beneath the wing of great power holding in the Night.

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