

INVESTING IN CHRISTMAS¹

Luke 2: 1-14

A Christmas Eve Meditation by Thomas R. McKibbens

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We invest a lot into Christmas. Recent surveys say that on average Americans spend \$600-800 per person. But that is only the money. We also invest a lot of time and energy and travel and thought into Christmas. And now we gather in a candle-lit church to invest these last few moments on the eve of Christmas in an act of worship. We are investing in Christmas.

I

One of the most memorable images of investing in Christmas comes, of course, in the story of Scrooge, who refused to invest a penny in Christmas. He thought it was a silly waste of time. He works late on Christmas Eve, sends his underpaid clerk home as late as possible, refuses to make a donation to the poor, turns down his nephew's invitation to Christmas dinner, and goes home to ignore it all. He refuses to invest anything in Christmas.

But then he goes to sleep and is visited by ghosts. First, it is his late business partner, Jacob Marley, followed by the ghosts of Christmas past and future. And through his restless night of dreaming, he wakes up a new man who greets Christmas morning determined to invest everything in Christmas.

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We love the way we invest in children at Christmas. Not just gifts, but investing in the time and effort we make for the annual Christmas pageant. It is a happy and wonderful time in any church. It is angels in tennis shoes, shepherds in bathrobes, and something unexpected always happens. Christmas pageants are like that. They're supposed to be like that!

We love stories like Barbara Robinson's "The Best Christmas Pageant Ever," the story of "the terrible Herdmans," and how they played key roles in the Christmas pageant that no one would ever forget. We invest in tradition and memory-making and memory-evoking.

II

Our investment is more than emotional, more than sentimental. Our investment is also theological. By investing in Christmas we are betting our lives that God is not some distant, uncaring Creator who cares nothing for the world and those who live in it. We are investing in the conviction that God cares enough to enter the world of real human need.

Theologians use fancy words for it like incarnation, virgin birth, and deity, partly because those words cover up the fact that it is such a mystery to us that we cannot use everyday terms. We cannot fully understand it or describe it. So we come on Christmas Eve when the lights are dimmed, the

candles are lit, the music is played and sung, and we worship the mystery of it all.

We love this story because it is such a mixture of the sublime and the human. Smack in the middle of the story we discover that Mary and Joseph are poor and cold and at least temporarily homeless. The shepherds are working-class, more Merle Haggard than J.S. Bach, more apt to be singing “Help Me Make It Through the Night” than the “Hallelujah Chorus.” They lived on the fringe of society, the last to be hired, the first to be fired, the last to go to college, the first to go to war. And the angel appears to *them!*

And we love the fact that the first words to almost everyone in the story is “Fear not,” a message so close to our hearts. To do anything worth doing in this world, we must live with our fears and get through them. Then the shepherds are told, *For behold, I bring you good news of great joy, which shall be to all people.* It is news both for them and for us! *For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*

The deep meaning of Christmas is that God invested in us in the earthiest possible way. When we read of a manger we are talking about a food trough for animals, a makeshift crib for a newborn. “Ox and ass before him bow, for he is in a manger now.” And the not so subtle message is that if God can visit a manger, then God can visit us wherever we are.

III

Your life's experiences may have smothered your spirit and made you too timid to invest in such a thing as Christmas. Tragedy can do that, or the loss of a job, or bad religion, or a bad relationship. But Christmas Eve may be a good time to reconsider your investment. Christmas is not about believing the unbelievable; it is about trusting the inevitable. God and the world inevitably belong together, and there is no place...not even your most carefully guarded place...that God cannot go.

“Christ was born for this! Christ was born for this!”