

December 24/25, Nativity (Isaiah 52:7-10; John 1:1-14)

## **What is the story within the story that we need to hear anew?**

by [Laurel Mathewson](#) in the [December 15, 2021](#) issue

One year, desperate for a striking story for my Christmas Eve sermon, I hid away from the children and the in-laws and tore through an Advent devotional. The vignette that grabbed my attention first caught it in a sour way. The author described a Christmas when she was given an unexpected, overwhelmingly generous gift: close friends offered her enough money to live on for a year so she could devote her time to writing. They believed in her and her work. With that gift of time, Harper Lee went on to write *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

It's a striking story, but I was annoyed. This is what Christmas means to Harper Lee? The biggest, most shocking gift she'd ever received, born of deep friendship, simple love, and faith in her value and potential? Good for her, I thought, but the last thing people need when they're reaching out for something beyond the present-laden tree is one more Christmas morning fairy tale.

Then it slowly dawned on me. This is the beginning arc and the foundational heart of the Christian tale: the gift of the Word made flesh, the grounds of our joy and celebration, trees and presents and all. A new life of deep intimacy with God, freely given—as gift, as grace. We are worth more to God than we ever imagined. We are worth the risk and sacrifice involved. “I can't believe it!” the shocked recipients cry.

The accoutrements of the holiday season can blind and distract us in many ways, but mostly this obfuscation works when we forget to look beneath the symbols, whether we are enjoying or resisting them. What is the story within the story that we need to hear anew? The light in the darkness. The secret-surprise gift, a baby-then-boy-then-man on the fringes. The raising up and drawing in of the humble and lowly.

The chapter of salvation history that begins with the nativity of Christ is a story of God's extravagant love and generosity. We are still heirs of this striking, good-faith

offering, living in a long and ongoing period marked by the unearned invitation to accept liberation, support, and partnership with God. Can we, as Brené Brown puts it, stop “hustling for our worthiness,” accept the holy check of our ultimate value on offer, and begin living as beloved and fruitful members of God’s household? What will we write with our lives? What work is on our hearts that is impossible without such grace?

Forget the debates about the virgin birth for a minute, the tired skepticism about pageant narratives. The true source of doubt (or worse, certainty) in our time is that we have trouble believing in such divine generosity—or human worthiness. The Christmas leap of faith centers on this gaping hole of a question: Who can believe that the strange creatures we see in the mirror and on the street are worth the trouble to God? The pandemic has greatly reduced our estimation of ourselves and of the whole human race. To understand that we are not as good as we thought we were—to be humble—can be healthy ground for holy cultivation. But just as too much fertilizer can destroy tender seeds, too much of this dark judgment can kill the seeds of faith needed for renewal of life. We know anew that we are not the light, but that does not mean the light has abandoned us, or that we cannot testify to the light that the darkness of the pandemic has not overcome.

In September I gathered with a small group of women from my church to tell our pandemic “spiritual autobiographies.” The darkness was deep, and tears transcended the lag time of translation across language differences. A devoted mother of six didn’t know how she could help her children with online learning when she cannot read. A grandmother said her COVID anxiety had been completely eclipsed by the sudden deaths of her son and grandson. A recently divorced woman was enduring cancer treatment on her own. A young mother had spent time in a behavioral health unit for anxiety. A widow had just buried her husband of more than five decades.

And yet all of them, in their own languages and words, said this: God answered when I cried out in prayer and desperation. God loved me through other people. God loved me when I was all alone. God is the only one holding me together, the only one who can hold me. It is very hard, but God is with me.

“What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.” Each woman’s story was a witness to the ongoing nativity gift, and as we gathered for a closing prayer, my heart sang with Isaiah. This is an Isaiah 52 Christmas if

we've ever seen one: "Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people." I could not be with these women in person for much of the pandemic. But they could perceive the light of God with them, in them, holding them in chaotic storms like beloved children enduring a long nightmare. They received the gifts of faith and held them tight. Their ongoing work in the world is as beautiful and impressive to me as *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

The true light came into the world, and has not given up on us yet. Because apparently we are worth more than we know. Each nativity, we testify to this extravagant, ever-surprising gift.