

Christmas Imagination

Today we are going to undertake a bit more serious and intense journey than we usually do on Christmas. It's not that I mean to downplay the joy and wonder of Christmas; in fact, my goal is to deepen that joy and wonder.

But often in life, we don't realize the value of what we have until it is taken away. As with Charles Dickens' *Christmas Carol*, there are times when we need to travel through some dark shadows to get down to the core of what this holiday is all about.

I promise we'll get back to the joy. But for a few moments, we are going to leave behind the lights, the trees and decorations, the Christmas carols, and presents, and "Merry Christmas."

Today, we're going to erase Christmas from our world. Since Christmas is all about Immanuel, God With Us, that means we're going to have to go a step further. We are going to have to imagine a world without God.

We are not doing this as an intellectual exercise. We are not asking theological questions about negative infinity, or where is God in the mystery and order of the cosmos, and could it exist without a prime mover?

Our task is not to imagine a world without religion. Nor are we asking where God is in society and whether our culture or nation can survive without a connection to God.

Those are fascinating questions but they are not our questions today. The question we are asking is up close and personal. We ask, what would *my* world be like in the absence of Immanuel—God With Us?

I wish this question were as theoretical as those other questions about the existence of God, or the function of religion, or the relationship of God to creation, or to society.

I wish this were so foreign a concept that we could not even speak about it with any degree of believability, much less authority. But, sadly, it turns out this subject does not call for much imagination at all.

There have been devout, religious folks who have peered into the darkness and considered the possibility of a world without Immanuel. The author of Psalm 88 was one

of them. Psalm 88 is not a psalm you ever hear on Sunday morning. We did not use it today because it's a little too edgy for a Christmas service.

It is a psalm that imagines a world without Christmas, without a loving God. It was written by someone so overwhelmed by pain or fear or sorrow or loss that he was really having trouble detecting the presence of God in his world. He says things like:

“My soul is full of troubles.”

“I am like those who have no help, like those forsaken among the dead, like those whom you remember no more.”

“I am shut in so that I cannot escape, my eye grows dim through sorrow.”

“Wretched and close to death from my youth, I suffer your terrors. I am desperate.”

“Your wrath has swept over me; your dread assaults destroy me. They surround me all day long.”

The Psalmist is staring right into the possibility that a loving, compassionate God does not exist, that he is stuck in this world without the comfort of a God who cares.

I have been fortunate in life. I don't pretend to know what it feels like to peer over the edge into the darkness of that world. But in my years in ministry I have met a few people who have. And I can draw a very detailed picture of that darkness, because I have seen up close, people living in that reality.

This story is very hard to tell, and it is even more uncomfortable having to relate it in the middle of the most joyous season of the year, at the very time when kids are dancing with glee to find what Santa left them.

But this story is part of Christmas, and it has to be told, for in the telling, the meaning and joy of Christmas will shine through all the more intensely.

It was in my second year as a pastor, in the small town of Creston in Southwest Iowa at the beginning of the Advent season. I received a phone call from a doctor who told me about a patient with a story to break your heart.

He had just met with this woman who was about my age at the time, in her 50s, a woman dying of cancer. To make matters worse, she had also suffered a severe stroke that greatly limited her abilities.

That's a sober enough beginning to her story, but it gets worse. This woman had no family other than a sister who lived far away at some unknown address, whom she had not heard from in many years.

In the course of his examination, the doctor asked her if she would a visit from a pastor or a priest. She indicated that she wanted this very badly. For some reason that no one was able to explain, she requested a Lutheran pastor, which was why the call came to me.

When I went to visit Alberta, I saw all too clearly what my world would be like without Immanuel. I found her alone in her room, lying in a fetal position on a bed in a dark corner of a nursing home room. As I sat beside her, she looked at me with an expression that haunts me to this day, an expression of pain, fear, and utter hopelessness.

I saw in that expression someone who had given up trying to hold on to her last shred of dignity. She had splotches of vomit all over her shirt, which I discovered was not uncommon because her illness had left her largely unable to move. Swallowing was so difficult and painful that it was hardly worth the effort to her; and when she did, the result was often what I saw.

I tried to speak with her, to make some connection with her, only to discover that the stroke had robbed her of that function. She could only, with great difficulty, nod or shake her head. And so many of the questions I wanted to put to her went unasked.

Because she could answer only yes or no questions, I will never know how her life came to be the way it was, or even why she wanted a Lutheran pastor to visit her.

She was able to confirm to me what the doctor had told me. She had no family. No faith community or social organization of any kind to lean on. She shook her head when I asked if she had any friends. Through nods and shakes she told me that she had lived in this town for virtually her entire adult life, and had no meaningful connection to anyone.

Perhaps it was the pain and depression talking; but I suspect it was true.

She told me that she knew nothing about God, or Jesus, or the Christian faith. She was frightened of the death that was fast closing in on her. She didn't even need to tell me that; her eyes were filled with terror.

This picture I have just presented to you is very close to a picture of what you or I would look like in a world without God. There is only one act of imagination needed to complete the picture.

Take her out of the nursing home, where the staff, reflecting the love of God, tried to make her as comfortable as they could. Put her alone in a dark, cold apartment, or in a makeshift cardboard shelter in an alley. That is what you or I would look like in a world without Immanuel.

It was not in the devastating string of illnesses that she found herself separated from God. I have seen how God is able to be present with people in the most difficult of health circumstances.

It was in the utter aloneness, the fear, and most of all, the hopelessness that she lived apart from God. When things are terrible, and getting worse, and you cannot visualize any possible circumstance or event that will ever make that better, that is a portrait of living without God.

When you have no one in your life, neither family nor friends who care whether you live or die, when your entire existence seems to have gone unnoticed and you think, with good reason, that your passing away will not make a speck of difference to anyone in the world, that is a portrait of living without God.

When you are convinced that life is nothing but a cruel molecular accident, and when that open grave staring you in the face calls you into the icy grip of the grim reaper, that is portrait of living without God.

The reason I am telling you this story is because it is my most vivid memory of Christmas in my ministry. For me, it is a story that explains Christmas on a level far deeper than Santa Claus, or Christmas trees, or even reading the Nativity story.

The picture I have presented to you is the reality that Jesus came to obliterate from the face of the earth, and I cannot imagine a greater, more joyful event in this world than to see that happen.

Listen to the words of the prophet Isaiah:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light

For a child has been born for us and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

His authority shall grow continually and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore.

God came to us at Christmas to get close to creation. To seek and to save the lost, no matter how buried they are in neglect and hopelessness.

God broke into our world to destroy the bleak portraits of emptiness. Jesus appeared in a manger in a stable, as a little baby, so that everyone on earth would have the one ingredient necessary for life: hope.

Imagine your life without hope, and you will see what life looks out without Christmas, without God. Hope is the one thing we cannot live without, whether we live in the empty shell of luxury, suffer through the horror of a country torn by violence, fight a losing battle against disease, or find ourselves crushed by grief.

In those moments when we lose hope, and we slide toward the emptiness of a lonely, dark corner, the love of God brings it back, often through family and friends, sometimes acquaintances and even total strangers. That's the way it's supposed to work.

The events and characters of the Christmas story--the shepherds, the baby in a manger, the angel chorus—have come to us to make certain that in the worst of times as well as in the best, each one of us has someone who can touch us with the hand of love and compassion, someone with whom we can share the life-giving gifts that God showered upon us.

Immanuel—God with us. Jesus came to us to show us what love is all about, so that no one would have to end their life alone, in a dark corner. So that no one would have to struggle without hope. So that no one would have to be without God.

God's work is not finished until that happens. And so *our* job as people of faith is not finished until that happens. We tell the story, and we carry the message of hope into all the dark places of the world.

Because of that first Christmas in Bethlehem, I was able to visit Alberta on Christmas Day, and on behalf of our congregation bring a ray of hope to a person living a razor's width away from a world without God.

To let her know how it feels to be special in God's eyes, to have a song written and dedicated to her, and performed in a worship service.

Alberta was not able to see what happened in our congregation or hear it, but as I told her the story, and shared with her the poem, she was able to imagine it. And that is what Christmas does to us.

This is the composition that we dedicated to Alberta, the present that brought her some peace at her last Christmas, and this morning, it is shared with you in her memory. So I invite you to close your eyes and imagine:

(To the tune of "Imagine" by John Lennon)

Imagine there was no Christmas

Existence without hope

Lying in pain in a dark abyss

No one willing to throw a rope

Imagine all the broken people

Living without love.

Imagine a drafty stable

A baby crying amidst the hay

God has come to find Alberta

Shepherds and angels lead the way.

*Imagine all the people
Singing, "Peace on earth."*

*You may think that I'm a dreamer
Well, dreams are seeds of what could be
When they take root in human hearts
Then all the world will be set free.*

*Imagine the lame leaping for joy
A feast springs from a single crumb
Imagine every sunset
Is a promise of more wonder to come.
Imagine all the people
Singing, "Joy to the world!"*

*You may think that I'm a dreamer
But those dreams are Christmas seeds of what could be
When they take root in human hearts
Then all the world will be set free.*

May the hope of the Christmas story be the lifeline that sustains each of you in your walk through life.