

A REVOLUTIONARY INTERVENTION

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Ever since I was a child and began to receive the message from the adults in my life that Christmas was more than the gifts, the trees, the lights, and the parties, I have fallen into the temptation that religious folk can't seem to escape—trying to explain the biblical story of Christmas, what happened when Jesus was born. I've even engaged in the side conversations about when the historical Jesus may have actually been born and the pagan origins of much of our seasonal celebrations. Perhaps that is the inevitable conceit of our modern Enlightenment sensibilities, with the need for historical facts, evidence, and justification. However, all of the sacred texts so beautifully read tonight, all of the sacred music we sang, all of the prayers do not offer explanation. They offer testimony. Even the characters within the stories, without our having to harmonize their different accounts—prophets, angels, shepherds, Mary, Joseph, even the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes—offer testimony. To what do they testify? The answer to that question requires a bit of effort and discernment.

Isn't it obvious that they are testifying to birth of Jesus? Even Linus in *A Charlie Brown Christmas* knew that. But if this festival of Incarnation, God's decision to be Emmanuel, God with us, is to live beyond the season, beyond the gifts, pageantry, and the consumerism, then what do we allow ourselves to see and hear in these testimonies in scripture, song, and prayer? What would it take for us to respond the way the shepherds responded when they heard the angelic proclamation? They said, "Let us go . . . to see this thing that has taken place, which God has made known to us"—not just hear it, but go.

Recall the context in which the shepherds made this decision to go, the context from which these testimonies about the baby arise. Mary gives birth in a political context of oppression, domination, and exploitation of poor and vulnerable people. They are surrounded by trappings of empire and the religious cult of the emperor of Rome, who is beheld as a savior ushering in a golden age of peace and prosperity for Rome. The people—the common folk—struggle and survive, fortified by the prophesy that a child has been born who will establish God's outpost within the world and uphold it with justice and righteousness. In the birth of this child, these sacred texts and these witnesses therein testify that God has intervened to save the world. This is a revolutionary message bearing witness to a revolutionary intervention.

Yes, we have inherited royalist text and imagery that hide what is truly revolutionary about the birth of a child into the lowly estate of peasant life but referred to as savior: That in the context of drudgery of life in a cold, closed, violent world where only the inevitability of death promised relief from oppression, a birth promises a transformed earth where justice and righteousness prevail. The thing that has taken place, which God has made known to us, is God's revolutionary intervention into time and history.

This revolution did not begin in rebellion, at least not in the violent version precipitated by force of arms. This revolution began in birth. According to the great mystic and teacher Howard Thurman, "The birth of a child—life's most dramatic answer to death—This is the Growing Edge incarnate." The subversive good news is that God is working in and through people not seen, heard, or known by empire; that God's people were not afraid to receive the child born for us, and we proclaim the good news they received in this

sanctuary tonight. No king, no power, no empire can inspire the world like this to proclaim glad tidings of great joy to all people and to sing hymns and melodies of hope, joy, peace, and love lo these many years hence. What a revolution!

We rinse out the mystery and the audacity of love incarnating into time and history if these songs, texts, and testimonies do not go with us or if they distract us from what is truly revolutionary about God becoming God with us. So, do not keep this good news relegated to Christmas carols and pageants or to personal devotion. The revolution continues even if we decide to dust it off for our attention but for one night a year. Reclaim the revolutionary power and intent to bring justice and righteousness. Let's do something befitting that revolutionary intervention God made in the birth of a baby. Let this room become the inn for the family seeking shelter. Let this be the manger that swaddles and nurtures God's beloved of every age, race, sex, creed, ethnicity, and others not thought of. Let us prepare our hearts with graces that will be shared always throughout every season. Above all else, let every day be the day that we decide, "Let us go . . . to see this thing that has taken place, which God has made known to us."