

“Upside down Christmas”

One of my favorite Christmas carols is one that I heard for the first time just a few years ago. It is a New Zealand carol called “Carol our Christmas.” It is about having Christmas in the southern hemisphere where this time of year is not winter but summer. The problem with all of the snowy and wintry carols of Europe and North America is that they don’t resonate with a New Zealander. She writes:

“Carol our Christmas, an upside down Christmas;
The snow is not falling and trees are not bare.
Carol the summer, and welcome the Christ Child,
Warm in our sunshine and sweetness of air.”

While we do not live in the southern hemisphere it might feel like we do on Christmas Day if weather forecasts are accurate. But it is not just the weather that makes this Christmas seem upside down. We have had nearly two tumultuous years of pandemic that has turned all life a bit upside down. We are exhausted by it. The non-COVID news has been similarly exhausting. So much so, that I advise people to ration their intake. In other areas there is some brightness. The economy has been doing better, the jobless rate is lower, and the stock market is up, but people are worried about inflation.

This mix of situations and emotions, of good news and bad news, topped off by unseasonable weather seems to put us off balance. But I wonder if it wasn’t always this way?

Let’s consider the Holy Family. Mary was pregnant, but not by Joseph to whom she was betrothed. He had thought of sending her away, but God intervened to keep them together. Then an emperor from across the sea had decided that everyone in Palestine would have to return to their ancestral home so that they could be counted and taxed. Many people had to travel through the hill country by foot (it is unlikely that a laborer like Joseph could have afforded a donkey for Mary) to get to the town of Bethlehem (Royal David’s City) to comply with the Roman demand for a census and new taxation. It was not enough to live in an occupied country, but to be forced to travel just so the emperor could get more taxes out of you was adding insult to injury.

The upside would be that Mary and Joseph would not travel alone, that would have been too dangerous since bandits roamed the hill country where Roman authority was limited. Mary and Joseph would have traveled with others from Nazareth. They also would meet up with others along the way. It might be a time for renewing friendships and learning about what was happening in other towns and cities around Galilee, Samaria and Judea. As poor folk and people under duress often do they made the best of a tough situation.

When they arrived in Bethlehem, which means the house of bread in Hebrew an allusion not only to the local grain crops but also to hospitality; they cannot find any place to stay except for a stable. And wouldn’t you know it but Mary goes into labor. We can hear Mary wondering aloud “Wasn’t it enough that we had to travel all this way but now I am in labor?” Joseph answers, “Our family is far away, and I don’t know where to find a midwife in this strange town.” Mary says between her contractions, “It was hard enough to find a place to

sleep here, what are we to do?” Joseph in his exasperation says to no one in particular, “Good grief!”

Despite these issues Mary seems to have given birth uneventfully. The one upside down thing that does happen that night is a group of shepherds come looking for the baby. The shepherds tell the parents how they had been visited by angels and were sent to see this wondrous thing.

But it was just a baby. There is nothing particularly special about that. Children are born every day, indeed every hour of every day. And the baby did not look or act differently than other babies. It is also not unusual for babies to be born at an inconvenient time or in an inconvenient place. Renaissance artists notwithstanding, there don't seem to have been halos around the heads of the Holy Family. This little trio was just one more beleaguered family in the backwater of a great empire. So what?

Yet I think that the question, “So what?” may also be the answer to the question, “So what?” The whole point was the ordinariness of what was happening. It was just a baby born to a traveling couple. Not much there for the Bethlehem Times-Mirror to report. But what we have is a miracle hidden in plain sight and revealed only to some shepherds who were watching their flocks by night.

God comes into the world and into history, but not as a fully grown human or one of the powerful elite. God comes as a helpless child, born to a poor couple, far from home, and who are part of a people oppressed by a great power.

And so more than two thousand years later even in the midst of our concerns and worries we stop for a day or two and recognize the beauty, wonder, and joyous possibility in the midst of the impossible. A little child is born who will become a great king; a great king that never has a throne in a big capital city. Rather a king whose cradle, and home, and throne is the human heart.

We celebrate this everyday miracle of the birth of a child, because this little child changed everything. God in the guise of a baby breaks into history and breaks history open. The world was turned upside down and inside out. Rulers and common folk, the wealthy and the poor, the powerful and the powerless of every color and land and people will pay homage to this little child. Through the actions of this couple and their child who is the Messiah we learn that all that the world values—money, power, celebrity—is meaningless, and all that seems ephemeral—hope, peace, love and joy—is what gives meaning.

While our Christmas might feel more upside down than most this year, we know that it was ever this way and that is what makes it a real Christmas.

“Right side up Christmas belongs to the universe,
Made in the moment a woman gives birth;
Hope is the Jesus gift, love is the offering,
Everywhere, anywhere, here on the earth.”