

“What Child is this?”

More than any other time of the year we want to sing at Christmas. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of Christmas carols. For all of the simple, subtle, magnificent, and glorious music we sing or hear at Christmas one carol speaks to my heart more tenderly, intimately, mysteriously, and lovingly than any other. It is the carol that we just sang—“What child is this?”

That carol invites me into the particular situation of Mary and Joseph. It allows me to live into what they must have felt in their hearts and wondered in their minds. Regardless of the angels, the startling dreams, and the adoration of the shepherds they must have wondered how this little baby was going to turn out, and what all of the heavenly portents would mean for them as parents, as a family, and especially for this little boy wrapped in swaddling clothes.

Each year I am drawn more and more to the reality that the birth of Jesus is not just a holiday or the celebration of some long ago event. Instead, each year we are called to welcome Jesus into the world, and most especially into our hearts, again for the first time.¹ As with the birth of any child we can join Mary and Joseph as they look on in wonder and ask “What child is this?”

Perhaps the most tender line in all of Luke’s beautiful Gospel is when as the nativity narrative is ending and the shepherds are about to return to their flocks, Luke writes, “Mary kept all of these things and pondered them in her heart.”

So when I sing “What child is this” I feel so close to Mary in her pondering. I cradle him in my heart in wonder at what his birth this year will bring. How will he break open my heart this year and help me live more fully into the man God made me to be. Will he be a comfort in my sorrows? Will he be an inspiration for me creativity? Will he steal my heart from all other pursuits? Will our love for each other unite us even more profoundly than I think is possible? I could go on and on, because the possibilities with Jesus are endless. Whatever he will bring me this year there is one thing that remains true, I cannot resist him or deny him. God knows I tried for many years, but he would not stand for it. Jesus’ love persists and I must relent.

“What child is this?” we wonder in our song. He is more than a spiritual guide, a wise man, and a storyteller. He is more than a teacher, preacher, and healer. His love for each of us transcends these limiting labels. When we allow him to reign in our hearts we find a source of life, wonder, riches, and joy that cannot be stored up in bank vaults, bonds, gold or any other malleable and ultimately impermanent thing. With him alive in our hearts nothing else really matters. He is the love of our life. He is the balm for this troubled and trembling world. He is the peace that passes all understanding. He is what makes it worth singing all those great and glorious carols. Truly he can be our whole reason for living.

What child is this? This child is love. Cradle him in your heart not only this day but every day of the year. Give yourself to him and he will give you more joy than you can imagine. Give your heart to him and he will free you from what weighs you down. His is the joy that persists despite everything that the world throws at you. His joy comforts and consoles us in our deepest, darkest nights. So cradle this little babe in your heart. Ponder all about him as Mary did. Tend to him and he will change you. For to be born in your heart is his heart’s desire.

¹ Apologies to the late Marcus Borg.