

GET UP AND GO!

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Grace Church in in New York
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The shepherds said one to another, "Let us go now even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us." (Luke 2:15)

Let's begin tonight with a story that might help us unfold the great mystery of the Incarnation, even though it may strike you at first as having nothing to do with Christmas at all. The story comes out of the Hasidic tradition, and tells of a poor old Jew named Isaac, who lived alone in a small shack, far away from a great metropolis. One night Isaac dreamed that if he were to get up and go to the city, he would find there under the main bridge leading into town a bag of gold worth more money than he could ever spend. Thus at the first streak of dawn he embarked on the long and dangerous journey. He arrived many days later, hungry and exhausted, only to find that the bridge was heavily guarded. Nevertheless, Isaac began snooping around in hopes of discovering the treasure he believed would be there. It was not.

At length a guard on the bridge spotted Isaac poking around below, and he called down to him, "You there! What are you doing?" Having found nothing, Isaac confessed to the guard: "I dreamed a great treasure was to be found under the bridge, but I see that nothing is here." The guard shouted back, "You're a foolish old man. Where would we all be if we paid attention to our dreams? Just last night I dreamed that if I traveled to a far off village I would find a bag of gold hidden behind the hearth of a poor, old Jew. You don't see me running off, do you? Now away with you!" Isaac did indeed hurry home, and there behind some stones in his own fireplace, he found the bag of gold he was promised in his dreams. The treasure that would change his life was there all the time, but he had to go on a journey to find it.¹

This brings me back to the great mystery of the Incarnation. How can the old story help us come to a deeper understanding of Christmas? First, we might focus on the treasure itself, the bag of gold hidden in Isaac's fireplace. Who put it there? When? And why? The story ends and we can only wonder. Likewise, the message of Christmas declares that a great treasure lies hidden among us, within human nature. But this treasure is no bag of gold. This treasure is the light and life of God that has the power to save our souls. What is more, the Christian story presses on with answers to the questions of who, and when, and why. Who put the treasure in human nature? God put it there. When? At one point in human history, when a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed, God became one of us. Not just any God, mind you, but the God of Israel who claimed through the prophets to be the only true and living God. This God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who both made the world and keeps it still, descended from the heights of his transcendent otherness, slipped into time and space, and became human in the person of Jesus. St. John would write: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... and the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.* It is the great mystery we call the Incarnation. It is all done for us.

But why? Why would God take on flesh and assume human nature? Put another way, why would God hide the treasure of himself in the earthen vessel of humanity? St. Paul would say that God was in Jesus to reconcile the world to himself (2 Cor. 5:19). St. John (1:12) would say that the reason was to give us power to become children of God. The purpose of the Incarnation was to link heaven and earth, to open a door that makes possible a new relationship between God and all of us. But the guard on top of the bridge would sneer. "This is all just the stuff of dreams," he would say. How can you know that the Incarnation is anything more than the product of someone's

overactive imagination? These glad tidings of great joy are just fake news. “Now away with you!” So say the worldly guards atop the citadels of reason and rationality and cynicism.

How do we respond? Well, we have more to say than any one Christmas congregation can bear to hear. But in a nutshell, we would point first to history. We would point to the impact that the life of Jesus, particularly his death and resurrection, had on the people who knew him. Quite frankly, it took the church three-hundred years to arrive at any sort of agreed upon statement as to who Jesus was, so great was his initial and continuing effect on the world. Those who began writing about him – all of them resolutely monotheistic Jews – came to the shocking conclusion that God himself had visited them through this individual. But at what point did Jesus most fully reveal his oneness with the God of Israel? When did he become the Son of God? Was it his resurrection, or his death, or his baptism, or his birth? The writings suggest that not even his birth was his beginning. St. Mark, the earliest Gospel, traces foreshadowings of Jesus back to Isaiah, seven-hundred years before the birth which we celebrate tonight. St. John goes all the way back to the moment of creation: *In the beginning was the Word ... and the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.* So if the New Testament authors are to be taken seriously, what we hear them saying is that the active Word of God has been on the mind of God from before time and forever. Indeed, the Word is eternally begotten of the Father: God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made. This is the Word that wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restores the dignity of human nature. It is here – He is here – ready to begin anew with you and me, ready to save our souls.

Still, it’s all very theoretical, isn’t it? The problem with the way we talk about the Incarnation – and indeed, much of the Christian faith – is that we are relegated to the role of merely passive recipients of God’s good gifts. We have nothing to do. We just sit here in time and space, and God does all the work. It’s rather like filling up your car’s gas tank in New Jersey. You just sit there and the attendant does all the work. Don’t get me wrong; I love New Jersey. I was born there. But what if you are a take-charge person, and you want to pump your own gas? You’re out of luck. Not long ago I was in the Garden State and in need of gas before returning to the city. So I pulled into a station, rolled down my window, and waited for an attendant. No attendant was forthcoming. The driver at the pump ahead of me must have been a take-charge sort of guy, because he ran out of patience, got out of his car, and began trying to pump his own gas. Can you blame him? I wanted to do the same thing. I wanted to pump my own gas. Of course, poking around the pump instantly produced the attendant. Angry words ensued and the man quickly retreated back to his car, because the law states that you cannot pump your own gas in New Jersey. Why not? It is a great mystery. It is an inscrutable mystery.

Forgive the crude analogy, but the Christian faith says the same thing about human nature. Without the infusion of divine grace that only God could pour into humanity through Jesus, we would never have the power to get where we need to go. That infusion of divine grace is precisely what we celebrate tonight. It is the treasure that will change your life. It is what we call the Incarnation. But where is it? “Where shall wisdom be found, and where is the place of understanding?” asked Job (28:12). Mortals do not know the way to it. Sadly, many trudge through every day without even knowing it exists at all, much like Isaac before he had his dream.

Remember, the treasure that would change Isaac’s life was with him all the time, but to find it he had to go on a journey. This is good news for any and all take-charge people who want to do something, and assume a more conscious level of participation in their faith. St. James (1:21-22) would challenge us to do two things: to receive with meekness the implanted word, but also to be doers of the word and not merely hearers of it. What does it mean to be a doer of the word? It means we have a journey to take. It means we need to get up and go.

The more I read the Christmas narratives of Matthew and Luke, the more I am struck by all the getting up and going in the stories. We hear of Mary and Joseph. Mary was great with child. Mary more so than anyone else had the Word within her all the time. But she and Joseph had many miles to cover. Luke tells us that they traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem, a distance of approximately one-hundred miles. Then, soon after Jesus' birth, Matthew explains that the holy family had to embark on another journey, this time from Bethlehem to Egypt, a distance of over four-hundred miles. How did Joseph know where to go? He was warned in a dream.

We hear of others who also received the call to get up and go. Luke tells us of the shepherds, abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night. It was just another quiet night until an angel of the Lord told them of Jesus' birth. How easy it would have been to dismiss the vision as indigestion: too much barley beer that night, or a bad batch of shepherd's pie. Where would we all be if we paid attention to dreams? But they did pay attention, and *said one to another, "Let us go – let us go now even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us."*

Then we have the famous Wise Men, and the long, hazardous journey they undertook. We don't really know who they were or where their starting point was, but Matthew tells us they were from the East. Legend has it that they were Persian. If so, they traveled over a thousand miles to see the newborn king of the Jews, and present their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Also they had to navigate their way around Herod, and his schemes to eliminate any new rival to his throne. How did they know where to go? A star in the sky, and more dreams. Where would we all be if we paid attention to dreams? Perhaps we'd all be getting closer to Bethlehem.

Make of the pageant cast what you will. What I hear the Christmas narratives saying to us this year is that you and I have a journey to take. Before we joyfully receive Jesus as our redeemer, we have to get up and go. I won't presume to tell you what your particular journey should be, except to say that the goal is Jesus. The goal is not a more fit, more cheerful you in 2018. The goal is the new relationship with God made possible by Jesus. Where is Jesus to be found? Because Mary and Joseph were poor, your journey might take you to others who lack basic necessities, and can find no room in the inn. You won't have to look far. Because the Wise Men opened their treasures, and presented gifts to the newborn king, the road you need to travel might be one of greater generosity. Because a multitude of the heavenly host appeared to some shepherds out in a field, perhaps the ground you need to cover is to realize that no job or situation is too mundane or out of the way for God to grace it with his presence. Because the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, it could be that the urgent journey required of you is toward a greater respect for the dignity of every human being.

Remember, the treasure that will change your life is with you all the time. Sadly, many people will dismiss their dreams, and tune out the Christmas angels, and silence the still, small voice of the Lord within them. And they will never know what they are missing. But tonight you've begun the journey by coming here. When you receive the bread and the wine at the altar, know that the Word is near you, on your lips and in your heart. This is the implanted Word that has the power to save your soul. This, this is Christ the king, whom shepherds guard and angels sing.

"Let us go now even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us."

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¹ The story is based on that told by Alan Jones in Journey into Christ, Cowley Publications, 1992, p. 20.