

# **Eternal Father**

Long Beach Alliance Church • December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2011 • Pastor Chris Lankford

**For a child will be born to us,  
a son will be given to us;  
and the government will  
rest on His shoulders;  
and His name will be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.**

**~Isaiah 9:6 (NASB)**

## **1) A People In Darkness**

- A) During this “Advent Season” (see the enclosed Advent materials for the significance of Advent for followers of Jesus Christ) we have been exploring a series of four “Messianic” titles from Isaiah 9:6.
  
- B) In all of the predictive prophecies involving the Messiah, the most repeated (and perhaps most remarkable) is that the Messiah would be a child. In this case, the child is a baby, receiving extraordinary titles.
  
- C) The first Messianic title is “Wonderful Counselor,” or “a wonder of a counselor” (Isaiah 9:6). In an age of darkness (9:2) where hope was lost, the Messiah comes to bring truly wonderful wisdom which will change lives forever!

D) The second Messianic title is “Mighty God,” (9:6). In time of powerlessness and oppression, the Messiah comes to provide true power through sacrifice and salvation!

## 2) Authentic Fatherhood

A) As the nation of Israel slipped into darkness, so did the families within Israel. Fathers allowed their families to follow darkened paths of idolatry and spiritual ignorance.

B) While God’s people were missing their fathers, God provides hope to His people, encouraging them with a powerful title of the Messiah -- Eternal Father\* (9:6).

C) Unlike the fathers who had forgotten their children, wives, and country -- The Messiah reveals that the true characteristics of a father are:

i) Protector (Psalm 146:9) -- A true father protects his wife, children, and friends from anything which could bring harm or shame to the name of Messiah Jesus.

ii) Provider (1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 5:8) -- A true father provides for his wife, children, and friends with all they need and gives rightful credit to Messiah Jesus.

---

\* This title must not be taken in an anachronistic Trinitarian sense, (to do so would be theologically problematic, for the “Son” is the messianic king and is distinct in His person from God the “Father.” Rather, in its original context the title pictures the king as the protector of his people. For a similar use of “father” see Isa 22:21 and Job 29:16. This figurative, idiomatic use of “father” is not limited to the Bible. In a Phoenician inscription (ca. 850–800 B.C.) the ruler Kilamuwa declares: “To some I was a father, to others I was a mother.” In another inscription (ca. 800 B.C.) the ruler Azitawadda boasts that the god Baal made him “a father and a mother” to his people (See “Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament,” 499–500). The use of “everlasting” might suggest the deity of the king (as the one who has total control over eternity), but Isaiah and his audience may have understood the term as royal hyperbole emphasizing the king’s long reign or enduring dynasty (for examples of such hyperbolic language used of the Davidic king, see 1 Kgs 1:31; Pss 21:4–6; 61:6–7; 72:5, 17). The New Testament indicates that the hyperbolic language (as in the case of the title “Mighty God”) is literally realized in the ultimate fulfillment of the prophecy, for Jesus will rule eternally. Selected notes from the NET (New English Translation) Bible, a unique Bible effort from the Bible Studies Foundation/Biblical Studies Press.

- iii) Visionary/Leader (Ephesians 6:4) -- A true father gives vision and leadership to his home and in all walks of life because of his relationship with Messiah Jesus.
- iv) Priest (Deuteronomy 6:4-9) -- A true father intentionally connects his family and friends to God in all aspects of his life because he is connected to Messiah Jesus.
- v) Gracious/Compassionate (Psalm 103:12-14) -- A true father gives grace and compassion to his family and friends to authentically reveal Messiah Jesus.

### 3) Eternal Fatherhood

- A) Unlike our natural, earthly fathers, the fatherhood of Messiah Jesus is one marked by infinite eternal characteristics (Isaiah 9:6). God, through Jesus, is eternal, everlasting, exceeding forever, to infinity and beyond!
- B) Jesus Christ, God in the flesh and our Messiah (John 1:1-2, 14), is not just an esteemed father who is “better than all others.” He is infinitely:
  - i) Knowledgeable (Psalm 139:1-6) -- Infinite knowledge of who we really are is in the heart of Messiah Jesus.
  - ii) Powerful (Psalm 31:1-5) -- Infinite power is manifest by Messiah Jesus in providing redemption for our souls.
  - iii) Loving (1<sup>st</sup> John 4:7-10) -- Infinite love comes from God through Messiah Jesus when we need it the most.
  - iv) Present (Psalm 94:14) -- The infinite presence of the Messiah never abandons His people.
  - v) Gracious/Compassionate (Hebrews 4:14-16) -- The infinite compassion of Messiah Jesus comes through His authentic humanity and invites us to receive mercy and grace -- especially in our times of need.

# Engaging Advent

The word “Advent” comes from the Latin *adventus*, which means “the approach” or “the arrival.” The Latin verb is *advenio*: “I arrive. I come. I am coming.”

For centuries, followers of Jesus Christ have observed this season with a passionate anticipation of Christmas morning, marking the joy of the birth of God in the flesh, Jesus Christ.

Popular writer and pastor, Dr. John MacArthur, notes the importance of why we celebrate Christmas... “Christmas as a holiday was not observed until well after the biblical era.

The early church of the New Testament celebrated Jesus’ resurrection, but not His birth. In fact, Christmas was not given any kind of official recognition by the church until the mid-5<sup>th</sup> century.

Partly because so many Christmas customs seem to have their roots in paganism, Christians have often been resistant to some of the rituals of the holiday. The Puritans in early America rejected Christmas celebration altogether. They deliberately worked on December 25<sup>th</sup> to show their disdain. A law passed in England in 1644 reflected a similar Puritan influence; the law made Christmas day an official working day. For a time in England it was literally illegal to cook plum pudding or mince pie for the holidays.

Christians today are generally not opposed to celebrating Christmas. The holiday itself is nothing, and observing it is not a question of right or wrong. As Paul wrote, “One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God” (Romans 14:5-6). Every day—including Christmas—is a celebration for us who know and love Him.

How we observe Christmas is the central issue. Do we observe it for the Lord's sake or for our own sinful self-gratification? Do we even think about why and how we celebrate it? That is the heart of the matter.

Christmas is an opportunity for us to exalt Jesus Christ. We ought to take advantage of it."

MacArthur's words ring in my ears when I think of what Christmas has become in our culture! Our world has largely captured this season and disguised it with Lord's-a-Leaping, Sleigh Bells Ringing, and a Jolly Old Elf.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with any of these special traditions... Unless we miss Jesus Christ in the midst of all the tinsel and trappings.

If we miss Jesus Christ, then we have missed Christmas, and we have missed the message of  
"Peace on Earth, and goodwill toward men..."

### Will this year be any different?

Simply, you are invited to engage Advent, perhaps for the first time in your life.

Through this season, which encompasses the four Sundays which lead up to Christmas, there will be special Advent Scripture readings which you (and your family) are invited to read during the week. There will also be some readings from Christian writers who have contemplated Advent over the centuries.

Will you schedule a time each day to anticipate His coming?  
Will you engage Advent?

Join with the shepherds, walk with kings from the East, sit with Herod as he hears of the Christ child, exult with Mary & Joseph, gaze on the star of Bethlehem all over again, as though this is the first time...

# Advent Scripture Reading

**As the prophets searched for the coming of the Messiah, will you also take time to look forward to the Messiah's coming this week? Seek His great Kingdom and recognize what it will look like through the eyes of the prophets.**

- Read 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 1:10-12
- Read Isaiah 9:2-7; 35:1-10

**The Bible is laced with Messianic prophecies which are filled with phrasings and predictions of what the Messiah would look like. Read this passage from Isaiah, and see if you can pick out the numerous prophecies about Messiah Jesus.**

- Read Isaiah 11:1-10

**There were many prophecies of Christ's birth, but there were also many about his suffering and death for His people's sins (intercession). Take some time to meditate on such a great God as the one who would suffer for people like us.**

- Read Isaiah 53:1-12

**The prophecies about the Messiah are also about a future King and His Kingdom which have not yet happened. Like the prophets of old, we wait, we look, we expect an arrival. Of what? Read of God's great future for us!**

- Read Isaiah 60:1-22

# Advent Reading #3 ~ Henri J. M. Nouwen

**Henri Nouwen (1932-1996) was a Catholic priest who taught as a professor at the University of Notre Dame, Harvard University, and in the Divinity Department of Yale University. He left the world of academia behind for the L'Arche Daybreak Community in Toronto, Canada to work with people who had severe physical and mental disabilities. He authored over forty books, most notably *The Wounded Healer* and *In The Name Of Jesus*. His writings reveal his Catholic background, but are devoutly Christian and reveal a heart which belonged exclusively to Jesus Christ.**

---

## *Waiting for God*

Waiting is not a very popular attitude. Waiting is not something that people think about with great sympathy. In fact, most people consider waiting a waste of time. Perhaps this is because the culture in which we live is basically saying, "Get going! Do something! Show you are able to make a difference! Don't just sit there and wait!" For many people, waiting is an awful desert between where they are and where they want to go. And people do not like such a place. They want to get out of it by doing something.

In our particular historical situation, waiting is even more difficult because we are so fearful. One of the most pervasive emotions in the atmosphere around us is fear. People are afraid – afraid of inner feelings, afraid of other people, and also afraid of the future. Fearful people have a hard time waiting, because when we are afraid we want to get away from where we are. But if we cannot flee, we may fight instead. Many of our destructive acts come from the fear that something harmful will be done to us. And if we take a broader perspective – that not only individuals but whole communities and nations might be afraid of being harmed – we can understand how hard it is to wait and how tempting it is to act. Here are the roots of a "first strike" approach to others. People who live in a world of fear are more likely to make aggressive, hostile, destructive responses than people who are not so frightened. The more afraid we are, the harder waiting becomes. That is why waiting is such an unpopular attitude for many people.

It impresses me, therefore, that all the figures who appear on the first pages of Luke's Gospel are waiting. Zechariah and Elizabeth are waiting. Mary is waiting. Simeon and Anna, who were there at the temple when Jesus was brought in, are waiting. The whole opening scene of the good news is filled with waiting people. And right at the beginning all those people in some way or another hear the words, "Do not be afraid. I have something good to say to you." These words set the tone and the context. Now Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary, Simeon and Anna are waiting for something new and good

to happen to them.

Who are these figures? They are representatives of the waiting Israel. The psalms are full of this attitude: “My soul is waiting for the Lord. I count on his word. My soul is longing for the Lord more than a watchman for daybreak. (Let the watchman count on daybreak and Israel on the Lord.) Because with the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption” (Psalm 130:5-7). “My soul is waiting for the Lord” – that is the song that reverberates all through the Hebrew scriptures.

But not all who dwell in Israel are waiting. In fact we might say that the prophets criticized the people (at least in part) for giving up their attentiveness to what was coming. Waiting finally became the attitude of the remnant of Israel, of that small group of Israelites that remained faithful. The prophet Zephaniah says, “In your midst I will leave a humble and lowly people, and those who are left in Israel will seek refuge in the name of Yahweh. They will do no wrong, will tell no lies; and the perjured tongue will no longer be found in their mouths” (Zephaniah 3:12-13). It is the purified remnant of faithful people who are waiting. Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary and Simeon are representatives of that remnant. They have been able to wait, to be attentive, to live expectantly.

But what is the nature of waiting? What is the practice of waiting? How are they waiting, and how are we called to wait with them?

Waiting, as we see it in the people on the first pages of the Gospel, is waiting with a sense of promise. “Zechariah, ...your wife Elizabeth is to bear you a son.” “Mary, ...Listen! You are to conceive and bear a son” (Luke 1:13, 31). People who wait have received a promise that allows them to wait. They have received something that is at work in them, like a seed that has started to grow. This is very important. We can only really wait if what we are waiting for has already begun for us. So waiting is never a movement from nothing to something. It is always a movement from something to something more. Zechariah, Mary, and Elizabeth were living with a promise that nurtured them, that fed them, and that made them able to stay where they were. And in this way, the promise itself could grow in them and for them.

Second, waiting is active. Most of us think of waiting as something very passive, a hopeless state determined by events totally out of our hands. The bus is late? You cannot do anything about it, so you have to sit there and just wait. It is not difficult to understand the irritation people feel when somebody says, “Just wait.” Words like that seem to push us into passivity.

But there is none of this passivity in scripture. Those who are waiting are

waiting very actively. They know that what they are waiting for is growing from the ground on which they are standing. That's the secret. The secret of waiting is the faith that the seed has been planted, that something has begun. Active waiting means to be present fully to the moment, in the conviction that something is happening where you are and that you want to be present to it. A waiting person is someone who is present to the moment, who believes that this moment is the moment.

A waiting person is a patient person. The word patience means the willingness to stay where we are and live the situation out to the full in the belief that something hidden there will manifest itself to us. Impatient people are always expecting the real thing to happen somewhere else and therefore want to go elsewhere. The moment is empty. But patient people dare to stay where they are. Patient living means to live actively in the present and wait there. Waiting, then, is not passive. It involves nurturing the moment, as a mother nurtures the child that is growing in her. Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary were very present to the moment. That is why they could hear the angel. They were alert, attentive to the voice that spoke to them and said, "Don't be afraid. Something is happening to you. Pay attention."

But there is more. Waiting is open-ended. Open-ended waiting is hard for us because we tend to wait for something very concrete, for something that we wish to have. Much of our waiting is filled with wishes: "I wish that I would have a job. I wish that the weather would be better. I wish that the pain would go." We are full of wishes, and our waiting easily gets entangled in those wishes. For this reason, a lot of our waiting is not open-ended. Instead, our waiting is a way of controlling the future. We want the future to go in a very specific direction, and if this does not happen we are disappointed and can even slip into despair. That is why we have such a hard time waiting: we want to do the things that will make the desired events take place. Here we can see how wishes tend to be connected with fears.

But Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary were not filled with wishes. They were filled with hope. Hope is something very different. Hope is trusting that something will be fulfilled, but fulfilled according to the promises and not just according to our wishes. Therefore, hope is always open-ended.

I have found it very important in my own life to let go of my wishes and start hoping. It was only when I was willing to let go of wishes that something really new, something beyond my own expectations could happen to me. Just imagine what Mary was actually saying in the words, "I am the handmaid of the Lord... let what you have said be done to me" (Luke 1:38). She was saying, "I don't know what this all means, but I trust that good things will happen." She trusted so deeply that her waiting was open to all possibilities. And she did not want to control them. She believed that when she listened

carefully, she could trust what was going to happen.

To wait open-endedly is an enormously radical attitude toward life. So is to trust that something will happen to us that is far beyond our own imaginings. So, too, is giving up control over our future and letting God define our life, trusting that God molds us according to God's love and not according to our fear. The spiritual life is a life in which we wait, actively present to the moment, trusting that new things will happen to us, now things that are far beyond our own imagination, fantasy, or prediction. That, indeed, is a very radical stance toward life in a world preoccupied with control.

Now let me say something about the practice of waiting. How do we wait? One of the most beautiful passages of scripture is Luke 1:39-56, which suggests that we wait together, as did Mary and Elizabeth. What happened when Mary received the words of promise? She went to Elizabeth. Something was happening to Elizabeth as well as to Mary. But how could they live that out?

I find the meeting of these two women very moving, because Elizabeth and Mary came together and enabled each other to wait. Mary's visit made Elizabeth aware of what she was waiting for. The child leapt for joy in her. Mary affirmed Elizabeth's waiting. And then Elizabeth said to Mary, "Blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled." And Mary responded, "My soul proclaims to greatness of the Lord" (Luke 1:45-46). She burst into joy herself. These two women created space for each other to wait. They affirmed for each other that something was happening that was worth waiting for.

I think that is the model of the Christ community. It is a community of support, celebration, and affirmation in which we can lift up what has already begun in us. The visit of Elizabeth and Mary is one of the Bible's most beautiful expressions of what it means to form community, to be together, gathered around a promise, affirming that something is really happening.

This is what prayer is all about. It is coming together around the promise. This is what celebration is all about. It is lifting up what is already there. This is what Eucharist is about. It is saying "thank you" for the seed that has been planted. It is saying, "We are waiting for the Lord, who has already come."

The whole meaning of the Christian community lies in offering a space in which we wait for that which we have already seen. Christian community is the place where we keep the flame alive among us and take it seriously, so that it can grow and become stronger in us. In this way we can live with courage, trusting that there is a spiritual power in us that allows us to live in this world without being seduced constantly by despair, lostness, and darkness. That is

how we dare to say that God is a God of love even when we see hatred all around us. That is why we can claim that God is a God of life even when we see death and destruction and agony all around us. We say it together. We affirm it in one another. Waiting together, nurturing what has already begun, expecting its fulfillment – that is the meaning of marriage, friendship, community, and the Christian life.

Our waiting is always shaped by alertness to the word. It is waiting in the knowledge that someone wants to address us. The question is, are we home? Are we at our address, ready to respond to the doorbell? We need to wait together to keep each other at home spiritually, so that when the word comes it can become flesh in us. That is why the book of God is always in the midst of those who gather. We read the word so that the word can become flesh, and have a whole new life in us.

Simone Weil, a Jewish writer, said, “Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life.” When Jesus speaks about the end of time, he speaks precisely about the importance of waiting. He says that nations will fight against nations and there will be wars and earthquakes and misery. People will be in agony, and they will say, “The Christ is there! No, he is here!” Everybody will be totally upset, and many will be deceived. But Jesus says you must stand ready, stay awake, stay tuned to the word of God, so that you will survive all that is going to happen and be able to stand confidently (con-fide, with trust) in the presence of God together in community (see Matthew 24). That is the attitude of waiting that allows us to be people who can live in a very chaotic world and survive spiritually.

---

## Advent Reading ~ Philip Yancey

**Philip Yancey is a popular Christian author who has sold over 13 million books. His most famous books are *Disappointment With God*, *Where Is God When It Hurts?*, and *What's So Amazing About Grace?* A skillful author and a dedicated Christian, Yancey's words open up the wounded heart and allow the Word of God to minister in a profound fashion.**

### *The Visited Planet*

Sorting through the stack of cards that arrived at our house last Christmas, I note that all kinds of symbols have edged their way into the celebration. Overwhelmingly, the landscape scenes render New England towns buried in snow, usually with the added touch of a horse-drawn sleigh. On other cards, animals frolic: not only reindeer but also chipmunks, raccoons, cardinals and cute gray mice. One card

shows an African lion reclining with a foreleg draped affectionately around a lamb.

Angels have made a huge comeback in recent years, and Hallmark and American Greetings now feature them prominently, though as demure, cuddly-looking creatures, not the type who would ever need to announce “Fear not!” The explicitly religious cards (a distinct minority) focus on the holy family, and you can tell at a glance these folks are different. They seem unruffled and serene. Bright gold halos, like crowns from another world, hover just above their heads.

Inside, the cards stress sunny words like love, goodwill, cheer, happiness, and warmth. It is a fine thing, I suppose, that we honor a sacred holiday with such homey sentiments. And yet when I turn to the gospel accounts of the first Christmas, I hear a very different tone, and sense mainly disruption at work...

Even those who accept the supernatural version of events concede that big trouble will follow: an old uncle prays for “salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us”; Simeon darkly warns the virgin that “a sword will pierce your own soul too”; Mary’s hymn of thanksgiving mentions rulers overthrown and proud men scattered.

In contrast to what the cards would have us believe, Christmas did not sentimentally simplify life on planet earth. Perhaps this is what I sense when Christmas rolls around and I turn from the cheeriness of the cards to the starkness of the Gospels.

Christmas art depicts Jesus’ family as icons stamped in gold foil, with a calm Mary receiving the tidings of the Annunciation as a kind of benediction. But that is not at all how Luke tells the story. Mary was “greatly troubled” and “afraid” at the angel’s appearance, and when the angel pronounced the sublime words about the Son of the Most High whose kingdom will never end, Mary had something far more mundane on her mind: But I am a virgin!

Once, a young unmarried lawyer bravely stood before my church in Chicago and told of a sin we already knew about: we had seen her hyperactive son running up and down the aisles every Sunday. Cynthia had taken the lonely road of bearing an illegitimate child and caring for him after his father decided to skip town. Cynthia’s

sin was not worse than many others, and yet, as she told us, it had such conspicuous consequences. She could not hide the result of that single act of passion, sticking out as it did from her abdomen for months until a child emerged to change every hour of every day of the rest of her life. No wonder the Jewish teenager Mary felt greatly troubled: she faced the same prospects even without the act of passion.

In the modern United States, where each year a million teenage girls get pregnant out of wedlock, Mary's predicament has undoubtedly lost some of its force, but in a closely knit Jewish community in the first century, the news an angel brought could not have been entirely welcome. The law regarded a betrothed woman who became pregnant as an adulteress, subject to death by stoning.

Matthew tells of Joseph magnanimously agreeing to divorce Mary in private rather than press charges, until an angel shows up to correct his perception of betrayal. Luke tells of a tremulous Mary hurrying off to the one person who could possibly understand what she was going through: her relative Elizabeth, who miraculously got pregnant in old age after another angelic annunciation. Elizabeth believes Mary and shares her joy, and yet the scene poignantly highlights the contrast between the two women: the whole countryside is talking about Elizabeth's healed womb even as Mary must hide the shame of her own miracle.

In a few months, the birth of John the Baptist took place and amid great fanfare, complete with midwives, doting relatives, and the traditional village chorus celebrating the birth of a Jewish male. Six months later, Jesus was born far from home, with no midwife, extended family, or village chorus present. A male head of household would have sufficed for the Roman census; did Joseph drag his pregnant wife along to Bethlehem in order to spare her the ignominy of childbirth in her home village?...

Nine months of awkward explanations, the lingering scent of scandal – it seems that God arranged the most humiliating circumstances possible for his entrance, as if to avoid any charge of favoritism. I am impressed that when the Son of God became a human being he played by the rules, harsh rules: small towns do not treat kindly young boys who grow up with questionable paternity.

Malcolm Muggeridge observed that in our day, with family-planning clinics offering convenient ways to correct “mistakes” that might disgrace a family name, “It is, in point of fact, extremely improbable, under existing conditions, that Jesus would have been permitted to be born at all. Mary’s pregnancy, in poor circumstances, and with the father unknown, would have been an obvious case for an abortion; and her talk of having conceived as a result of intervention of the Holy Ghost would have pointed to the need for psychiatric treatment, and made the case for terminating her pregnancy even stronger. Thus our generation, needing a Savior more, perhaps, than any that has ever existed, would be too ‘humane’ to allow one to be born.”

The virgin Mary, though, whose parenthood was unplanned, had a different response. She heard the angel out, pondered the repercussions, and replied, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.” Often a work of God comes with two edges, great joy and great pain, and in the matter-of-fact response Mary embraced both. She was the first person to accept Jesus on his own terms, regardless of the personal cost.

When the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci went to China in the sixteenth century, he brought along samples of religious art to illustrate the Christian story for people who had never heard it. The Chinese readily adopted portraits of the Virgin Mary holding her child, but when he produced paintings of the crucifixion and tried to explain that the God-child had grown up only to be executed, the audience reacted with revulsion and horror. They much preferred the Virgin and insisted on worshipping her rather than the crucified God.

As I thumb once more through my stack of Christmas cards, I realize that we in Christian countries do much the same thing. We observe a mellow, domesticated holiday purged of any hint of scandal. Above all, we purge from it any reminder of how the story that began in Bethlehem turned out at Calvary.

In the birth stories of Luke and Matthew, only one person seems to grasp the mysterious nature of what God has set in motion: the old man Simeon, who recognized the baby as the Messiah, instinctively understood that conflict would surely follow. “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that

will be spoken against...” he said, and then made the prediction that a sword would pierce Mary’s own soul. Somehow Simeon sensed that though on the surface little had changed – the autocrat Herod still ruled, Roman troops were still stinging up patriots, Jerusalem still overflowed with beggars – underneath, everything had changed. A new force had arrived to undermine the world’s powers...

The earliest events in Jesus’ life, though, give a menacing preview of the unlikely struggle now under way. Herod, King of the Jews, enforced Roman rule at the local level, and in an irony of history we know Herod’s name mainly because of the massacre of the innocents. I have never seen a Christmas card depicting that state-sponsored act of terror, but it too was a part of Christ’s coming. Although secular history does not refer to the atrocity, no one acquainted with the life of Herod doubts him capable. He killed two brothers-in-law, his own wife Mariamne, and two of his own sons. Five days before his death he ordered the arrest of many citizens and decreed that they be executed on the day of his death, in order to guarantee a proper atmosphere of mourning in the country. For such a despot, a minor extermination procedure in Bethlehem posed no problem.

Scarcely a day passed, in fact, without an execution under Herod’s regime. The political climate at the time of Jesus’ birth resembled that of Russia in the 1930’s under Stalin. Citizens could not gather in public meetings. Spies were everywhere. In Herod’s mind, the command to slaughter Bethlehem’s infants was probably an act of utmost rationality, a rearguard action to preserve the stability of his kingdom against a rumored invasion from another...

And so Jesus the Christ entered the world amid strife and terror, and spent his infancy hidden in Egypt as a refugee. Matthew notes that local politics even determined where Jesus would grow up. When Herod the Great died, an angel reported to Joseph it was safe for him to return to Israel, but not to the region where Herod’s son Archelaus had taken command. Joseph moved his family instead to Nazareth in the north, where they lived under the domain of another of Herod’s sons, Antipas, the one Jesus would call “that fox,” and also the one who would have John the Baptist beheaded.

A few years later the Romans took over direct command of the southern province that encompassed Jerusalem, and the cruelest and

most notorious of those governors was a man named Pontius Pilate. Well-connected, Pilate had married the granddaughter of Augustus Caesar. According to Luke, Herod Antipas and Roman governor Pilate regarded each other as enemies until the day fate brought them together to determine the destiny of Jesus. On that day they collaborated, hoping to succeed where Herod the Great had failed; by disposing of the strange pretender and thus preserving the kingdom.

From beginning to end, the conflict between Rome and Jesus appeared to be entirely one-sided. The execution of Jesus would put an apparent end to any threat, or so it was assumed at the time. Tyranny would win again. It occurred to no one that his stubborn followers just might outlast the Roman empire...

As I read the birth stories about Jesus I cannot help but conclude that though the world may be tilted toward the rich and powerful, God is tilted toward the underdog. "He has brought down rulers from their thrones but lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but sent the rich away empty," said Mary in her Magnificat...

I wonder what Mary thought about her militant hymn during her harrowing years in Egypt. For a Jew Egypt evoked bright memories of a powerful God who had flattened a pharaoh's army and brought liberation; now Mary fled there, desperate, a stranger in a strange land hiding from her own government. Could her baby, hunted, helpless, on the run, possibly fulfill the lavish hopes of his people?

Even the family's mother-tongue summoned up memories of their underdog status: Jesus spoke Aramaic, a trade language closely related to Arabic, a stinging reminder of the Jews' subjection to foreign empires.

Some foreign astrologers (probably from the region that is now Iraq) had dropped by to visit Jesus, but these men were considered "unclean" by Jews of the day. Naturally, like all dignitaries they had checked first with the ruling king of Jerusalem, who knew nothing about a baby in Bethlehem. After they saw the child and realized who he was, these visitors engaged in an act of civil disobedience: they deceived Herod and went home another way, to protect the child. They had chosen Jesus' side against the powerful.

Growing up, Jesus' sensibilities were affected most deeply by the poor, the powerless, the oppressed – in short, the underdogs. Today theologians debate the aptness of the phrase “God’s preferential option for the poor” as a way of describing God’s concern for the underdog. Since God arranged the circumstances in which to be born on planet earth – without power or wealth, without rights, without justice – his preferential options speak for themselves...

There is one more view of Christmas I have never seen on a Christmas card, probably because no artist, not even William Blake, could do it justice. Revelation 12 pulls back the curtain to give us a glimpse of Christmas as it must have looked from somewhere far beyond Andromeda: Christmas from the angels’ viewpoint.

The account differs radically from the birth stories in the Gospels. Revelation does not mention shepherds and an infanticidal king; rather, it pictures a dragon leading a ferocious struggle in heaven. A woman clothed with the sun and wearing a crown of twelve stars cries out in pain as she is about to give birth. Suddenly the enormous red dragon enters the picture, his tail sweeping a third of the stars out of the sky and flinging them to the earth. He crouches hungrily before the woman, anxious to devour her child the moment it is born. At the last second the infant is snatched away to safety, the woman flees into the desert, and all-out cosmic war begins.

Revelation is a strange look by any measure, and readers must understand its style to make sense of this extraordinary spectacle. In daily life two parallel histories occur simultaneously, one on earth and one in heaven. Revelation, however, views them together, allowing a quick look behind the scenes. On earth a baby was born, a king caught wind of it, a chase ensued. In heaven the Great Invasion had begun, a daring raid by the ruler of the forces of good into the universe’s seat of evil.

John Milton expressed this point of view majestically in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, poems which make heaven and hell the central focus and earth a mere battleground for their clashes. The modern author J.B. Phillips’ fantasy to try to escape my earthbound viewpoint.

In Phillips’ version, a senior angel is showing a very young angel

around the splendors of the universe. They view whirling galaxies and blazing sounds, and then flit across the infinite distances of space until at last they enter one particular galaxy of 500 billion stars:

As the two of them drew near to the star which we call our sun and to its circling planets, the senior angel pointed to a small and rather insignificant sphere turning very slowly on its axis. It looked as dull as a dirty tennis-ball to the little angel, whose mind was filled with the size and glory of what he had seen.

“I want you to watch that one particularly,” said the senior angel, pointing with his finger.

“Well, it looks very small and rather dirty to me,” said the little angel. “What’s special about that one?”

When I read Philips’ fantasy, I thought of the pictures beamed back to earth from the Apollo astronauts, who described our planet as “whole and round and beautiful and small,” a blue-green-and-tan globe suspended in space. Jim Lovell, reflecting on the scene later, said, “It was just another body, really, about four times bigger than the moon. But it held all the hope and all the life and all the things that the crew of the Apollo 8 knew and loved. It was the most beautiful thing there was to see in all the heavens.” That was the viewpoint of a human being.

To the little angel, though, earth did not seem so impressive. He listened in stunned disbelief as the senior angel told him that this planet, small and insignificant and not overly clean, was the renowned Visited Planet:

“Do you mean that our great and glorious Prince... went down in Person to this fifth-rate little ball? Why should He do a thing like that?”...

The little angel’s face wrinkled in disgust. “Do you mean to tell me,” he said, “that He stooped so low as to become one of those creeping, crawling creatures of that floating ball?”

“I do, and I don’t think He would like you to call them ‘creeping, crawling creatures’ in that tone of voice. For, strange as it may seem to us, He loves them. He went down to visit them to lift them up to

become like Him.”

The little angel looked blank. Such a thought was almost beyond his comprehension.

It is almost beyond my comprehension too, and yet I accept that this notion is the key to understanding Christmas and is, in fact, the touchstone of my faith. As a Christian I believe that we live in parallel worlds. One world consists of hills and lakes and barns and politicians and shepherds watching their flocks by night. The other consists of angels and sinister forces and somewhere out there places called heaven and hell. One night in the cold, in the dark, among the wrinkled hills of Bethlehem, those two worlds came together at a dramatic point of intersection. God, who knows no before or after, entered time and space. God, who knows no boundaries, took on the shocking confines of a baby's skin, the ominous restraints of mortality.

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation,” an apostle would later write; “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” But the few eyewitnesses on Christmas night saw none of that. They saw an infant struggling to work never-before-used lungs.

Could it be true, this Bethlehem story of a Creator descending to be born on one small planet? If so, it is a story like no other. Never again need we wonder whether what happens on this dirty little tennis ball of a planet matters to the rest of the universe. Little wonder a choir of angels broke out in spontaneous song, disturbing not only a few shepherds but the entire universe.

# Advent Notes