

Wonderful Counselor

Long Beach Alliance Church • December 4th, 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

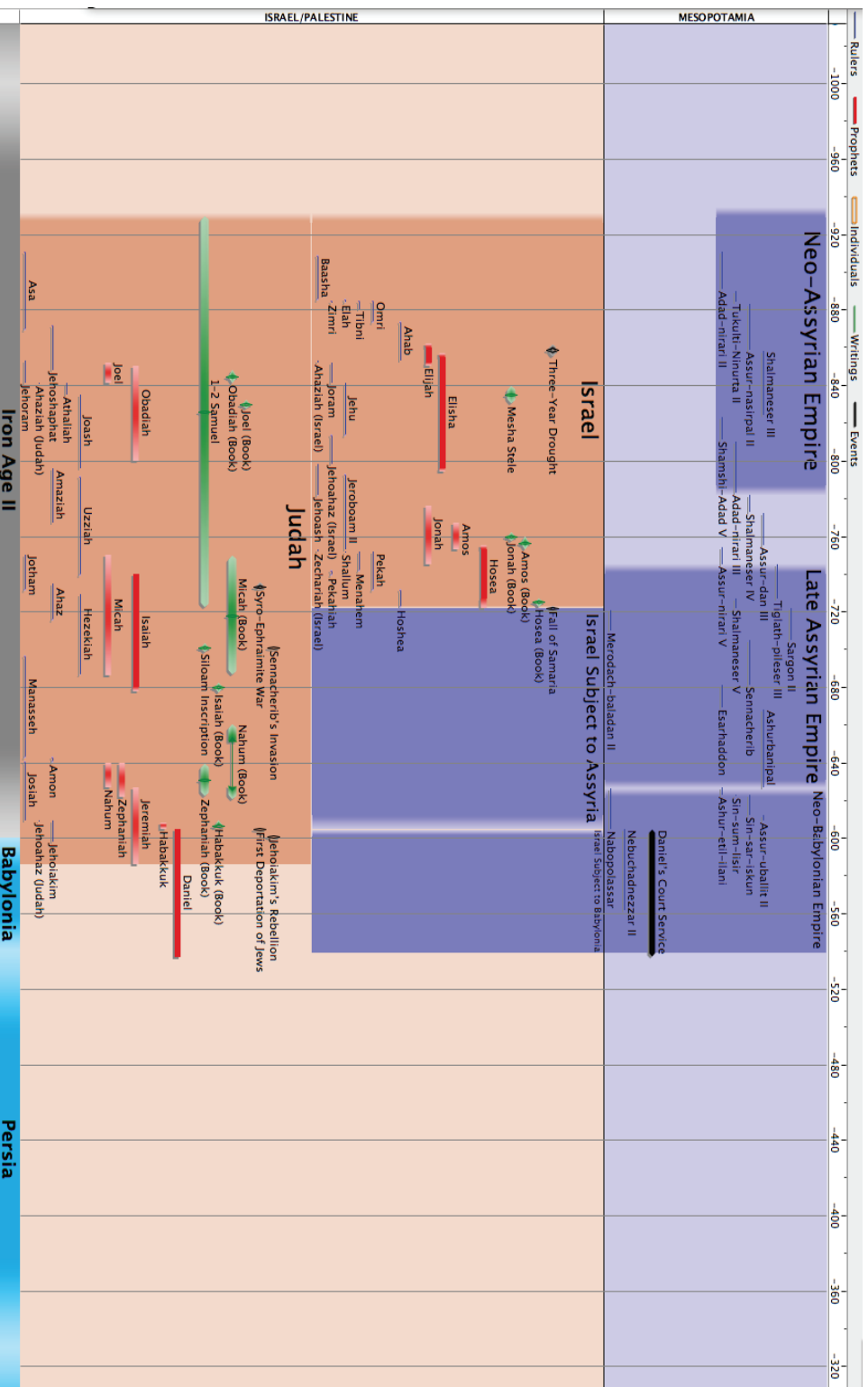
- A) During this “Advent Season” (see the enclosed Advent materials for the significance of Advent for followers of Jesus Christ) we are going to explore a series of four titles from Isaiah 9:6.

- B) Isaiah was a prophet in the Southern Kingdom of Judah during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (Isaiah 1:1). Isaiah’s writings come from this important period of time which preceded Judah being taken into captivity by the Assyrian Empire (see timeline for details).
 - i) Uzziah/Azariah - basically a good king, but allowed idol worship in Judah. Also tried to offer sacrifices in the temple (an exclusive responsibility of the priesthood), and was judged by God with leprosy until his secluded death (2nd Kings 15:1-7; 2nd Chronicles 26:1-23).

- ii) Jotham - basically a good king, but (like his father), allowed idol worship in Judah (2nd Kings 15:32-38; 2nd Chronicles 27:1-9).
 - iii) Ahaz/Jehoahaz - an evil king of Judah, who fatefully struck an alliance with Assyria against Israel and Damascus (Kingdoms to the North of Judah), resulting in Judah becoming a vassal state of Assyria (2nd Kings 16:1-20; 2nd Chronicles 28:1-27).
 - iv) Hezekiah - a good king of Israel who instituted reforms and removed idol worship from Judah. Hezekiah was responsible for building up the fortifications of Jerusalem (2nd Kings 18:1-20:21; 2nd Chronicles 29:1-32:33).
- C) During the time of Ahaz' reign, the king of Israel (Pekah) and the king of Damascus (Rezin) proposed an alliance against Assyria (Tiglath-Pileser III/Pul) which Ahaz rejected, bringing down the wrath of King Pekah & King Rezin against Judah (Isaiah 7:1-2).
- D) God sent Isaiah to King Ahaz to encourage him to not worry about the incursion of King Pekah & King Rezin against Judah (7:3-11). However, Ahaz rejected God's counsel, and instead sent money to Tiglath-Pileser III proposing an alliance with Assyria (2nd Kings 16:7-18).
- E) Assyria crushed the kingdoms of Israel & Damascus, taking them into captivity, however, God was not pleased with King Ahaz, and rightfully judges Judah, predicting their slide into a total national darkness of soul & body (Isaiah 8:19-22).

2) A Promise Of Blinding Light

- A) Throughout the demise of God's people, Isaiah has scattered extraordinary promises of God saving His people through humble and simple means (Isaiah 7:14), especially through the life of a child.





- B) God speaks to His people through the words of Isaiah who are living under a spiritually bankrupt leader and in a country increasingly surrounded by enemies. They are a people in darkness (Isaiah 9:2). There is no hope, there is only a bankrupt future, there is no light...
- C) But God has not forgotten His people! Despite their decisions which have resulted in their own darkness, despite their decisions for sin, despite their failures -- GOD HAS NOT FORGOTTEN HIS PROMISES!
- D) God provides hope in the midst of the darkness, victory in the midst of defeat, redemption while the effects and powerful emotions of failure are still fresh (9:2-5).
- E) Unlike the government of Ahaz, which reached for power and security from Assyria, God will bring hope through the life of a child (peering out of the darkness), and His government will not be like Judah, it will be forever (9:6-7)!

3) Wonderful Counselor

- A) His name will be called Wonderful Counselor (9:6). Literally, He will be one who is a “wonder of a counselor.” The wisdom of the Messiah will be wonderful, beyond imagination, incredible, superior in every way!
- B) His counsel will not be limited to human counsel, but come from above. His will be true wisdom that knows that in weakness comes strength (as a child), that true victory will come through surrender, and in death will come life.
- C) This child will be born of a virgin (beyond human comprehension, 7:14), He will be the Light of the world, calling all men to repentance, but enthroned on a cross, achieving an incomprehensible victory forevermore!

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-5th 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 25th 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

Without God revealing the hope of the Messiah, we would never know of the depth of our need or of the hope of a Savior.

• Read 1st Peter 1:10-12

From ancient times God gave His chosen people hope in a coming Messiah. Join with them this week in anticipating the Messiah, in hearing the voice of God as it gazed into the future.

• Read Genesis 3:15, 12:1-3, 17:1-8

In the midst of oppression, the only thing to which God's people could look forward was the Messiah. Sometimes, in our comfort, we forget our overwhelming need. Still, for others of us, the need is intense. Glory in the message of God to the oppressed, the broken, and the needy.

• Read Isaiah 9:2-7, 11:1-5

For God's people, the hope of the Messiah was the hope in a new kingdom. Not a kingdom built by the hands of man, but a Kingdom built by the will of God. It would be God's Kingdom, where the Messiah was on the throne, and His people were able to be free from sin and pain forevermore. Can you, with them, see the Kingdom of God?

• Read Isaiah 11:6-12; 25:6-12; 32:1-5

Advent Reading #1 ~ J.B. Phillips

John Bertram Phillips was an Anglican (Church of England) minister in the early 1900's. He is most famous for his paraphrased translation of the New Testament, popularly known as the "Phillips Translation" today. He wrote the translation for young collegiate aged students who were not reading the Bible at all because the Authorized Version was too difficult. Phillips was a skillful writer, and had the support and encouragement of many people in England, especially C.S. Lewis. In addition to his remarkable translation of the New Testament, he also translated portions of the Old Testament. Phillips became a sought after apologist in his later years of life, always making his arguments for the faith easy to understand for the common man on the street. Phillips went home to be with the Lord in 1982, dying in the civil parish of Dorset, England.

The Dangers Of Advent

By far, the most important and significant event in the whole course of human history will be celebrated, with or without understanding, at the end of this season, Advent. The towering miracle of God's visit to this planet on which we live will be glossed over, brushed aside or rendered impotent by over-familiarity. Even by the believer the full weight of the event is not always appreciated. His faith is in Jesus Christ – he believes with all his heart that this man, who lived and died and rose again in Palestine, was truly the Son of God. He may have, in addition, some working experience that the man Jesus is still alive, and yet be largely unaware of the intense meaning of what he believes.

Does he, for instance, as he daily treads the surface of this planet, reflect with confidence that "my God has been here, here on this earth"? Does he keep his faith wrapped in a napkin as a precious thing and apart; or does he allow every discovery of the truth to enlarge his conception of the God behind this immensely complex universe? And does he then marvel and adore the infinite wisdom and power, which so humbly descends to human stature? We rejoice in the fact that God has actually been here – and that is one half of the meaning of Advent.

But there is another half. The eleven, who had six weeks' experience of the risen Christ, were told after he had finally left their sight, that "this same Jesus shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go." As a translator of the New Testament I find in it no support whatever

for the belief that one day all evil will be eradicated from the earth, all problems solved, and health and wealth be every man's portion! Even among some Christians such a belief is quite commonly held, so that the "second advent" of Christ is no more and no less than the infinite number of "comings" of Christ into men's minds. Of course, no one would deny that there are millions of such "coming" every year – but that is not what the Christian Church believes by the second advent of Christ; and it is most emphatically not what any writer of the New Testament ever meant in foretelling his second coming.

The New Testament is indeed a book full of hope, but we may search it in vain for any vague humanist optimism. The second coming of Christ, the second irruption of eternity into time, will be immediate, violent and conclusive. The human experiment is to end, illusion will give way to reality, the temporary will disappear before the permanent, and the king will be seen for who he is. The thief in the night, the lightning flash, the sound of the last trumpet, the voice of God's archangel – these may all be picture-language, but they are pictures of something sudden, catastrophic, and decisive. By no stretch of the imagination do they describe a gradual process.

I believe that the atheistic-scientific-humanist point of view is, despite its apparent humanitarianism, both misleading and cruel. In appearance it may resemble Christianity in that it would encourage tolerance, love, understanding, and the amelioration of human conditions. But at heart it is cruel, because it teaches that this life is the only life, that we have no place prepared for us in eternity, and that the only realities are those that we can appreciate in our present temporary habitation. Hence the current hysterical preoccupation with physical security, particularly in relation to the hydrogen bomb, which infects the lives of many professing Christians. When, we may well ask, have Christians been promised physical security? In the early Church it is evident that they did not even expect it! Their security, their true life, was rooted in God; and neither the daily insecurities of the decaying Roman Empire, nor the organized persecution which followed later, could affect their basic confidence.

In my judgment, the description which Christ gave of the days that were to come before his return is more accurately reproduced in this fear-ridden age than ever before in human history. Of course we do

not know the times and the seasons, but at least we can refuse to be deceived by the current obsession for physical security in the here-and-now. While we continue to pray and work for the spread of the kingdom in this transitory world, we know that its center of gravity is not here at all. When God decides that the human experiment has gone on long enough, yes, even in the midst of what appears to us confusion and incompleteness, Christ will come again.

This is what the New Testament teaches. This is the message of Advent. It is for us to be alert, vigilant and industrious, so that his coming will not be a terror but an overwhelming joy.

According to an old saying, familiarity breeds contempt. Of course this is not always true! In particular, it is often not true of people with whom we are familiar. Indeed, with the best kind of friends, the more we know them, the more we grow to love and respect them. It is only the people who are superficial and at heart unreal who let us down when we grow familiar with them. It is then that our previous admiration can turn to contempt.

But the old saying was not intended to apply only to human relationships. There are situations where human beings are at first filled with awe, and then as they grow more and more familiar with them they experience first indifference, then contempt. The "spiderman" who works on scaffolding hundreds of feet above the ground, has to be on his guard against this over-familiarity. The man who works with high-voltage electricity must also beware of becoming contemptuous of his danger. And anyone who knows the sea, but never loses your respect for it." Whenever familiarity breeds contempt there is potential danger.

The particular danger which faces us as Christmas approaches is unlikely to be contempt for the sacred season, but nevertheless our familiarity with it may easily produce in us a kind of indifference. The true wonder and mystery may leave us unmoved; familiarity may easily blind us to the shining fact that lies at the heart of Christmastide. We are all aware of the commercialization of Christmas; we can hardly help being involved in the frantic business of buying and sending gifts and cards. We shall without doubt enjoy the carols, the decorations, the feasting and jollification, the presents, the parties, the dancing and the general atmosphere of goodwill that

almost magically permeates the days of Christmas. But we may not always see clearly that so much decoration and celebration has been heaped upon the festival that the historic fact upon which all the rejoicing is founded has been almost smothered out of existence.

What we are in fact celebrating is the awe-inspiring humility of God, and no amount of familiarity with the trappings of Christmas should ever blind us to its quiet but explosive significance. For Christians believe that so great is God's love and concern for humanity that he himself became a man. Amid the sparkle and the color and music of the day's celebration we do well to remember that God's insertion of himself into human history was achieved with an almost frightening quietness and humility. There was no advertisement, no publicity, no special privilege; in fact the entry of God into his own world was almost heartbreakingly humble. In sober fact there is little romance or beauty in the thought of a young woman looking desperately for a place where she could give birth to her first baby. I do not think for a moment that Mary complained, but it is a bitter commentary upon the world that no one would give up a bed for the pregnant woman – and that the Son of God must be born in a stable.

This almost beggarly beginning has been romanticized by artists and poets throughout the centuries. Yet I believe that at least once a year we should look steadily at the historic fact, and not at any pretty picture. At the time of this astonishing event only a handful of people knew what had happened. And as far as we know, no one spoke openly about it for thirty years. Even when the baby was grown to be a man, only a few recognized him for who he really was. Two or three years of teaching preaching and healing people, and his work was finished. He was betrayed and judicially murdered, deserted at the end by all his friends. By normal human standards this is a tragic little tale of failure, the rather squalid story of a promising young man from a humble home, put to death by the envy and malice of the professional men of religion. All this happened in an obscure, occupied province of the vast Roman Empire.

It is fifteen hundred years ago that this apparently invincible Empire utterly collapsed, and all that is left of it is ruins. Yet the little baby, born in such pitiful humility and cut down as a young man in his prime, commands the allegiance of millions of people all over the world. Although they have never seen him, he has become friend and

companion to innumerable people. This undeniable fact is, by any measurement, the most astonishing phenomenon in human history. It is a solid rock of evidence that no agnostic can ever explain away.

That is why, behind all our fun and games at Christmastime, we should not try to escape a sense of awe, almost a sense of fright, at what God has done. We must never allow anything to blind us to the true significance of what happened at Bethlehem so long ago. Nothing can alter the fact that we live on a visited planet.

We shall be celebrating no beautiful myth, no lovely piece of traditional folklore, but a solemn fact. God has been here once historically, but, as millions will testify, he will come again with the same silence and the same devastating humility into any human heart ready to receive him.

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A Teaching: Four Questions for the Final Advent

Mark 13:32-37:

Jesus said, "But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Take heed. Watch—for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leave home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.

"Watch, therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, on in the morning

*"Watch, lest he come suddenly and find you asleep.
"And what I say to you I say to all: Watch."*

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

Who is coming?

As a season of Christian year, Advent is ancient. It goes back at least to the middle of the sixth century. Already then its observance defined not only the One who was coming, but also those who were faithfully and self-consciously waiting. It defined the peculiar people who looked forward to the coming of that One.

Who is coming? Who awaits him?

The Son of man, he is coming. Jesus. That one. Him.

And we are the people who await him. You and I. Since it was for us he died, we are the ones who wait in love. And since he ascended to heaven with promises to return, we wait in faith – for at the next and final Advent, Jesus will take us as friends, as brothers and sisters into his house forevermore.

And when will he get here? Like any New Year’s Day: at the end and the beginning.

But that Advent to come – the final arrival of Jesus in glory – will itself cause the end of this present age and the beginning of our eternal joy. When will that be? Ah, my friend, I do not know. No one knows its day or hour. Therefore Jesus commands us to “Watch. Stay awake. Get ready. Prepare, prepare – and watch!”

Finally, then, how shall we prepare? In these days, while yet there are days and time, by what activity should we make ourselves ready?

Why, by meditating on his first coming – for though the future may be hidden from us the past is not, and the one can teach us the other.

The story of the birth of Jesus is open before us. We have a spiritual and holy account of the time when God himself directed preparations for that first coming of his Son into the world. What God ordains is always good. Therefore, those preparations may be the perfect pattern

for our own this year again, this year too.

Behold, I bring you good news of great joy! The people who heard the news of that first Advent were no less human than we. They moved through complex stages of response: doubt, fear, questioning, the obedience of love, the obedience of legalism, joy and song, despair and anger. There were groups of people, shepherds, the Magi, innocent children; there were individuals, Zachariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph, Simeon, Anna, Herod. Some concluded their preparations in faith. Some in fury. Any one of these might be you, my friend. Or me. But we have the advantage, now, of meditation: in quietness and confidence to choose the right response, and, by the grace of the present Spirit of Jesus, to practice the right preparation for the coming of the Lord in Glory.

So let us enter the story one more time. In this present season of Advent let us experience the infant's Advent in the past and so make ourselves ready for the Advent of the Lord of Glory in the future.

O Lord, Stir up, we beg you, your power – and come. Come even now into this season of our meditations, that by your protection we may be rescued from our sins, and saved by your might deliverance in order to look forward to your final arrival with the joy that cannot be uttered. We pray in your name, O Lord, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, and forever. Amen

A Christmas Prophecy

The Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel. Isaiah 7:14

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

All this took place that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled saying, "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which translated means, "God with us." Matthew 1:22-23

A little girl came home from Sunday School triumphantly waving a paper. "Mommy!," she said. "My teacher says I drew the most unusual Christmas picture she ever seen!"

The mother studied the picture for a moment and concluded it was indeed a very peculiar Christmas picture. "This is wonderfully drawn, but why have you made all these people riding on the back of an airplane?," the mother gently asked.

"It's the flight into Egypt," the little girl said, with a hint of disappointment that the picture's meaning was not immediately obvious.

"Oh," the mother said cautiously. "Well, who is this mean-looking man at the front?"

"That's Pontius, the Pilot," the girl said, now visibly impatient.

"I see. And here you have Mary and Joseph and the baby," the mother volunteered. Studying the picture silently for a moment, she summoned the courage to ask, "But who is this fat man sitting behind Mary?"

The little girl sighed. "Can't you tell? That's Round John Virgin!"

We laugh, but the sad truth is that little girls' mixed-up perspective of Christmas is not really much more muddled than the notions the average person carries around. Christmas has become an elaborate fabrication, and our celebrations reflect that. The cast of characters we bring out at Christmas is no less bizarre than the ensemble that little girl put on her airplane. Our Christmases are the product of an odd mixture of pagan ideas, superstition, fanciful legends, and plain ignorance. The real message of Christmas is all but lost in the chaos.

Let's try to sort this all out this Christmas.