

NATIVITY

REDISCOVER THE MYSTERY



A FOUR PART DEVOTIONAL BY
STEVE STEWART

Beyond the traditional and romantic presentation of what took place on the first Christmas, the Nativity, if viewed carefully, reveals much about the mystery of God's work in the world. This short collection, *Nativity*, presents just a few of these.

DAY ONE: HIDDEN WONDER

Mystery is shrouded in the ordinary. To see God in a manger opens our eyes to see Him everywhere.

DAY TWO: THIN PLACES

The Nativity is the place where Heaven and earth overlap, where God and man become one, uniting us with Him forever.

DAY THREE: CLOTHED IN SMALLNESS

In the Nativity, we see the depth of God's involvement with us. He moves beyond compassion to full participation, thereby challenging us to never distance ourselves from our pain, distress, or suffering, or that of others.



DAY FOUR: THE GLORY OF GOD

*The way in which we look at the world is crucial.
When we can see with the eyes of faith, we can begin
to see God's glory everywhere.*

However you read these short chapters, either separately as a daily devotional, or in their entirety, it is my hope that they will serve to take you into new places of reflection upon the Christ-Child.

Steve
Steve



Before the Paling of the Stars

By Christina Georgina Rossetti

*Before the paling of the stars,
Before the winter morn,
Before the earliest cock crow,
Jesus Christ was born:
Born in a stable,
Cradled in a manger,
In the world his hands had made
Born a stranger.
Priest and king lay fast asleep
In Jerusalem;
Young and old lay fast asleep
In crowded Bethlehem;
Saint and angel, ox and ass,
Kept a watch together
Before the Christmas daybreak
In the winter weather.
Jesus on his mother's breast
In the stable cold,
Spotless lamb of God was he,
Shepherd of the fold:
Let us kneel with Mary maid,
With Joseph bent and hoary,
With saint and angel, ox and ass,
To hail the King of Glory.*



DAY
One

HIDDEN WONDER



One of my favorite Christmas albums is entitled *The Mystery of Christmas*. Besides its choral beauty, my heart is always captured by the reflection of timelessness and *otherness*. Perhaps that is part of the great allure of the Christmas season: we were created for its mystery.

In pursuing the mysterious depths of Christ's presence with us and within us, we are soon confronted with the fact that we are not to seek Him as we suppose He is or how we want Him to be. Rather, we are invited to "consent and surrender to the Ultimate Mystery just as He is, not as [we] think He is."¹ *Just as He is*. With all the wonder and bewilderment that entails. The Nativity narrative itself should prepare us for this.

The Nativity story celebrates the ordinary as extraordinary. For hundreds of years, Israel had been waiting for the arrival of the Messiah who would right all wrongs, and restore the nation to its true destiny.

1 Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart* (Bloomsbury Continuum, 2006) p.81



Through the prophetic proclamations and the careful study of scripture, the people, especially their religious leaders, believed they knew what signs to look for that would usher in the Savior of the nation.

The Gospel narrative begins with great expectation and bold proclamation. The angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah and then Mary to announce the birth of Jesus. The Holy Spirit fills Elizabeth, Mary, and Zechariah who respond with powerful prophetic songs about this Savior. Perhaps even more glorious is the appearance to the shepherds of the angelic host, declaring: *Glory to God in the highest heaven*. Imagine their great sense of anticipation as they ran to see “the Savior who is Christ the Lord, born to you in the city of David.”

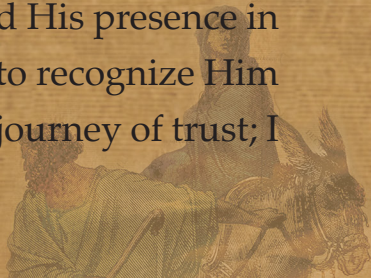
If we peel back the layers of romantic tradition, we encounter “the Ultimate Mystery just as He is”. We see a travel-weary couple from the lower working class (the *doulos* class Lu 1:48) who arrive in a town crowded with other travelers not there by choice, but



in response to a government edict. Jospheh and Mary have arrived too late to find lodging and so they must stay in what was likely a cave. In desperation, as Mary was giving birth, they had no choice but to put the baby in a feeding trough. This is the scene that the shepherds entered. No soft music or light. No carefully laid out Nativity scene. This was a sudden contingency plan. Centuries of prophetic anticipation and angelic proclamation led to *this*?

Here lies the beauty of the Nativity narrative. It points to the great and all-embracing truth that the depth, the sheer beauty of God and His work in creation is revealed in the ordinary. This confronts me at many levels.

For years, I would tend to evaluate the quality of my prayer time based on whether or not I “heard” the Lord speak to me, whether I gained some revelation or understanding, or even if I sensed His presence in and near me. Slowly, I am learning to recognize Him in the ordinariness of silence. It is a journey of trust; I



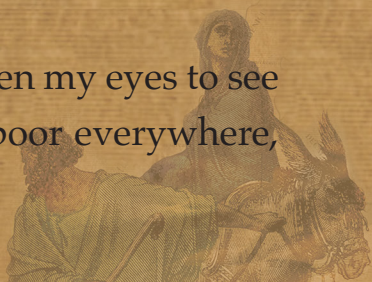
have come to believe that His presence, even if I cannot feel anything, is forming me. In the silence He is not speaking to my mind or emotions, but Spirit to spirit.

*“In repentance and rest is your salvation,
in quietness and trust is your strength” (Is 30:15)*

This kind of prayer seems so...ordinary. But like the Christmas story, it is wonder clothed in the everyday. It is faith that sees beyond appearances to God's reality.

To my surprise this is opening up my eyes to see, in increasing ways, Christ all around me; not to simply acknowledge His reality, but to *experience* and recognize Him in creation, in others, and in circumstances. If the Triune God is everywhere, as He surely is, then there is nothing that He will not use to connect my spirit with His.

Many years ago, I asked Jesus to open my eyes to see the poor. When He did, I saw the poor everywhere,



and couldn't imagine that I hadn't seen them before. In this season, as I see the sacredness and mystery of the ordinary, I am beginning to recognize His grace is everywhere, at all times. Why am I surprised? After all, the angels told us:

*Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.*



DAY
Two

THIN
*P*LACES



Over the past twenty years, there has been a greatly increased fascination with Celtic Christianity. Alongside this has come a new awareness of the ancients' concept of "thin places". A thin place is where the boundary between heaven and earth is especially porous, a place where we can sense the divine more readily. This ancient idea has gained a lot of traction, both in and outside of traditional Christianity.

The Old Testament is filled with examples of thin places: one of the clearest is Jacob at Bethel. After his vision of a ladder leading to and from heaven, Jacob exclaimed, "Surely God is in this place and I did not know it." For me, this verse has always reflected an important truth: God is continually breaking in, but far too often we are unaware.

Wherever Jesus went was a thin place because He continuously carried and released the reality of heaven. When He taught us to pray, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven", was not

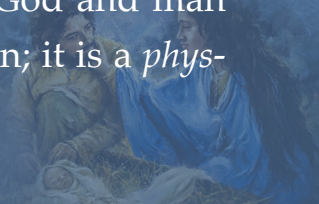


this a cry for the veil between the two to be penetrated? It seems to me that Jesus' earthly life began in a thin place: a cave in Bethlehem. Surely heaven and earth intersected in a manger.

At the center of the Nativity lies the mystery of the Incarnation, for in this humble setting, so easily overlooked by any passerby, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." God the Son, without leaving His divinity, took on humanity in all its weakness (and what could be weaker than a newborn baby). As St. John Chrysostom wrote:

"God is now on earth, and man in heaven; on every side all things commingle."

Christmas carols and cards make it all too easy for us to have our thoughts and emotions so wrapped in the romance of the season that we lose focus on what actually took place in Bethlehem. From the first moment of His birth, Jesus Christ was *and is* fully human and fully God. This union of God and man is not merely a moral or spiritual union; it is a *phys-*



ical union of two natures so as to make One Person. Christ did not set aside His divinity in order to come “dwell among us”. The Beginning and the End, the creator of all things and the One who holds the entire universe together, came to reveal the true nature and character of God in the utter frailty and smallness of an infant. (Jesus’ life began as only two microscopic cells. How vulnerable is *that*?) Only God Himself could have ever conceived such a thing.

The is the eternal union of Man and God. Because of the Nativity, for all eternity, the Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity, is one of us. He *became* human; He will *remain* human. The Incarnation is not just about the birth of Jesus. Rather, all of His life, His crucifixion, and His Ascension are part of this eternal union. Therefore, the Incarnation is not over; Jesus continues to live out His Sonship as a human. There is a Man right now as a member of the Trinity (1 Tim 2:5), and God continues to be with us this day and for all eternity.



If ever there was a thin place where the veil between heaven and earth was especially delicate, it was in the Bethlehem cave with the Holy Family. Beyond pointing to the greatest event in history—the Incarnation—the Nativity can open the door to experience both the intimate and transcendent.

Thin places can be well known historically and often become a place of pilgrimage. This is one of the reasons that I take opportunity when traveling to go into ancient cathedrals where the very stones are soaked with centuries of prayer and Christ-adoration.

But I believe we can cooperate with the Spirit to both recognize and perhaps even co-create personal thin spaces. This is why I have a particular place I go to each morning to quiet my thoughts and emotions and simply listen to the silence of Christ, knowing that His Spirit is connecting with, and moulding mine. It is a place of nearness, comfort, and intimacy, whether I feel these or not. It is also a place of personal history with Christ.



Imagine the faith and trust that was required of each person connected with the Nativity story. An infant who at the same time was the Savior of the world, indeed, who was God. And yet...In the thin place they encountered the reality of heaven in their midst with all its possibilities, with its infinite and eternal realities. In the thin space they bowed, not before a baby, but the King of Kings.

And so, when I consider the wonder of the Nativity, I will let it call me into the thin place that the Lord and I have created together. Or should I say, the place that I have attentively made room for Him to create.

"In My Father's house are many rooms. I go to prepare a place for you." (Jn 14:2)



DAY
Three

CLOTHED IN
*S*MALLNESS



The Christmas story is profoundly enigmatic. It was anticipated in prophetic declarations reaching back centuries. Angelic proclamations announced that a King is coming soon who will bring justice and restoration to the nation, and indeed, the world. Yet as the story unfolds, it is clothed in smallness, almost insignificance.

As we have already considered, in the Incarnation, God entered the world as fully man and fully God. Contrary to expectations, He did not come as the conqueror; He came as Immanuel—God *with* us. In the Nativity, the Creator comes to us small and vulnerable. From His first moments on earth, God the Son identifies with our frailty. God can never again be understood in a distant or impersonal way because He did not simply observe our condition; He was not content to stop at understanding or even feeling compassion. Beyond these, God *participated*. As Eugene Peterson wrote, “God moved into the neighborhood.”

This morning I was sent a traditional painting of the



Nativity. Cattle, shepherds and others looked on with quiet adoration upon a peaceful Mother and Child. It was pleasant to see, but hardly reflected the reality of the situation.

Joseph and a very pregnant Mary had just completed a journey of over 70 miles, which likely took four days. As exhausted as they were, it seems that they arrived in Bethlehem late in the evening because there were no more available rooms. Instead of a warm bed, they faced rejection at place after place. Surely, this is not what Mary imagined carrying the Messiah would be like. How many of us would have felt overwhelmed by disappointment, confusion, and fear? From the beginning, He is God with us, beyond compassionate observance to full participation.

The Nativity shouts out God's identification with our weakness at so many levels. The stark fact is that Joseph went ahead and married a pregnant woman. This would likely have been common knowledge in Nazareth. There would have been very little point in trying to explain



the supernatural, God-infused circumstances to family and neighbors. Along with this couple, God embraces all those who are shamed or ridiculed because of questionable birth.

The first to hear the announcement of Christ's birth were a group of shepherds. Like all shepherds, they performed their place in the community *outside* of the town, separated by both place and vocation. (Notice that the Gospel both begins and ends outside the walls.) Shepherds were near the bottom rung of Jewish society; they were not even permitted to give testimony. Yet they were the first to hear the news that would change all of history.

And then consider the Three Magi. These were Gentile astrologers from far away in the east. (In my early days of pastoring, there were many warnings about "New Agers" and how dangerous their thinking was for the Church. Yet somehow, I have always thought of the these eastern travelers as the three New Agers.) So from the beginning, the Nativity was shared with social, ethnic, and religious outsiders. What a beautiful Gospel!



The Nativity reminds us that, contrary to society, God's favor is upon the poor. The Son of God could have been born to any wealthy or powerful family, yet He chose a young woman from the servant class. As Mary sang out, *"For he took notice of his lowly servant girl."* (Lu 1:48) When Jesus was dedicated at the Temple, rather than the sacrifice of a sheep that was normal for a first born, Mary and Joseph dedicated Him with two pigeons—the offering prescribed for the poor.

In Matthew's account, we read that an angel warned Joseph to flee for the life of his family to Egypt, where they stayed until the death of Herod the Great. The Nativity not only points to God's identification with the poor, the shamed, and the lowly; it also embraces political refugees. In a time when there are currently more refugees than at any time in history, this truth is comforting for some, and challenging for others.

The Nativity brings the comfort of God's profound identification with me at my weakest. But it does not stop there. The Nativity is the great turning point. While



we expect the important things to be big and obvious, Christ's birth is what Jesus told us: the Kingdom of God breaks in small and unnoticed, like mustard seed or leaven. But from there, inexorably it takes root and grows, ultimately turning everything upside down.

Weeping is transformed to joy. Instead of despair, living hope—God's certainty—does its work. As Mary prophesied in her magnificent song,

He has done mighty deeds by his power.

*He has scattered the people who are proud
and think great things about themselves.*

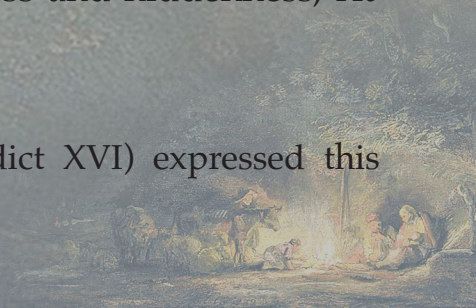
*He has brought down rulers from their thrones
and raised up the humble.*

He has filled the hungry with good things"

(Lu 1:51-53)

The Nativity both reminds and reassures me that, although He comes in smallness and hiddenness, *He surely comes.*

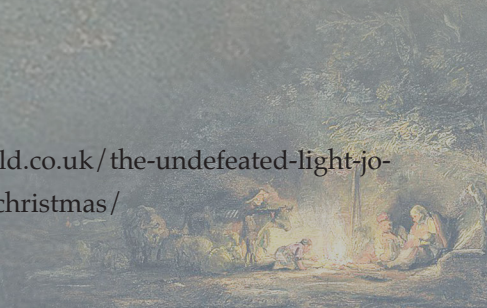
Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) expressed this



beautifully:

“The real and the highest values occur in this world precisely under the sign of lowliness, hiddenness, silence. The great thing about which the destiny and the history of the world hangs is that which appears small in our eyes. In Bethlehem, God, who had chosen the small, forgotten people of Israel as His people, finally made the sign of littleness the decisive sign of His presence in this world.”¹

¹ Joseph Ratzinger <https://catholicherald.co.uk/the-undefeated-light-joseph-ratzinger-on-the-true-meaning-of-christmas/>



DAY
Four

THE
GLORY
OF GOD



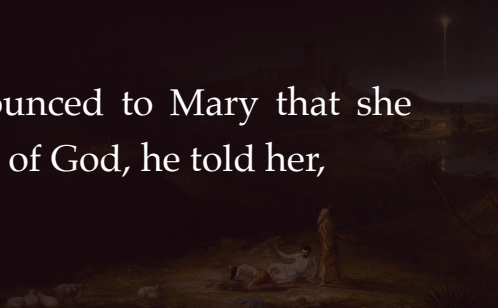
For as long as I can remember, the most thrilling part of the Christmas story has always been the sudden arrival of the angelic host, proclaiming to the shepherds,

*“Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”*

The angels’ appearance instantly shattered the boundaries and expectations of the frightened men. Three times in Luke’s account angels suddenly break into the everyday normalcy of life. And each time, they call their audience—and us—to a bigger vision, a new understanding. The angel said to Zechariah, a middle-aged priest, these disruptive words:

*“Don’t be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John. You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth”
(Lu 1:13-14)*

And when the angel announced to Mary that she would give birth to the Son of God, he told her,

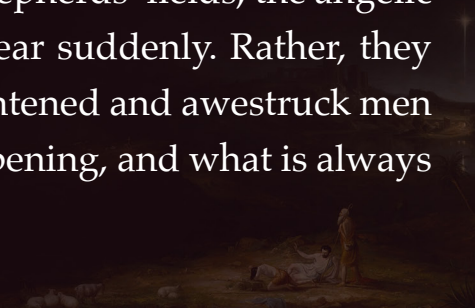


He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. (Lu 1:32)

Good tidings of great joy, indeed.

When God breaks in, His invitation always comes with a choice: will we let go of what we have always perceived to be true in favor of a new reality, one for which we have little evidence? This, of course, is called faith. But real faith is often discomfoting, calling us to believe beyond our current boundaries. Exciting, but fragile and intimidating. It is so easy for me to slip back into the familiar. Therefore, I need Jesus to break in again and again on my journey, reminding me, like His disciples, to keep on seeing, hearing, and remembering (Mk 8:18).

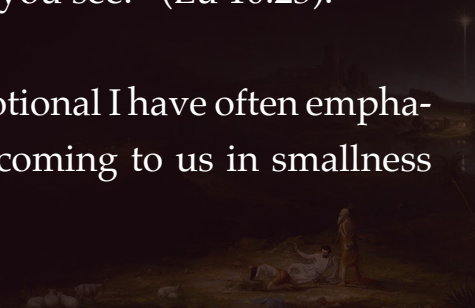
I suspect that out in the shepherds' fields, the angelic host did not actually appear suddenly. Rather, they allowed this group of frightened and awestruck men to see what is always happening, and what is always



with us: the Glory of God. And that is why I so love this angelic episode in the Nativity story. God's reality breaks in so that you and I can see, feel, and *know* the great, overarching truth of the Kingdom of Heaven. It is not *there*, but *here*. It is not *then*, but *now*.

Earlier today, I was thinking about one of Jesus' greatest promises: "Did I not tell you that if only you believe, you will see the glory of God?" (Jn 11:40) Like Mary who first said 'yes' to God, like the shepherds who ran to a cave, like the Three Magi who traveled over a thousand miles, the Nativity challenges me to believe in an active and concrete manner. The Nativity invites me into a new way of seeing: from Heaven's eternal, supernatural, angelic perspective. Surely, this means learning to choose to believe—deeply, experientially, devotionally. This is both the source and the environment of blessing. Jesus said, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see." (Lu 10:23).

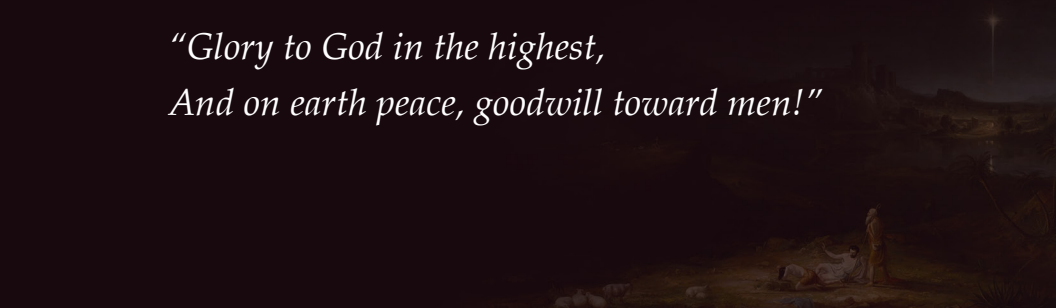
Throughout this brief devotional I have often emphasized the miracle of God coming to us in smallness



and frailty. His self-emptying continued through to the Cross, which I believe is God's greatest revelation of His true nature. But the Gospel is both crucifixion and resurrection. The Nativity points to this.

We look with wonder at the God-Child, seeing that in the weakness of this newborn infant lies the fate of all humanity. As we look on, our hearts are once again captured by the sheer beauty of Jesus and, paradoxically, His abject surroundings. Yet, the wonder and power of the moment, piercing both time and space, is so magnificent, so grand, that all of the angels of Heaven cannot help but cry out in jubilation and adoration. Yes, on that Divine night, Heaven came down. But equally, the Nativity calls you and I up and up—to increasingly see and participate in the Heaven that is both all around us and *in* us. This is the glory of God.

*“Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”*



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