

*From Bedlam to Bethlehem, 4*  
**Christmas Memories**

Luke 2: 1 – 7

\*\*In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

\*\* "We just don't do whole things anymore." That's the claim made in an insightful article about our snippet-culture by Adam Thierer, senior research fellow at George Mason University. Thierer says, "We don't read whole books. We don't listen to entire musical pieces—or even an entire CD. We don't write complete sentences either!" The gist of the article: "We care more about parts and less about the entire... [so] We are not only a *fragmented* society, but a society of *fragments*." It's little wonder that many people hold on to mere fragments of the Bible and the message of the Christian faith!

I think Thierer is making a valid point. We so seldom do whole things anymore. I find that I frequently stop reading books after I've figured out where they're going. Or, I read excerpts. We *don't* listen to entire CDs — just samplings. With iTunes we just download the songs we 'like' – how often do people buy an entire album these days? Or, we tune into Pandora/ iTunes radio and specify, 'this is the *only* kind of music I ever want to hear', so we limit ourselves. We don't sit through whole baseball games... We watch RedZone on TV so we only have to see the football scoring plays – and not all the 'boring parts' in-between!

You know, I was reading this article and thinking... now, this is a little extreme, he's exaggerating! But then it occurred to me (a day or two later) that, um, well, I didn't bother to read the whole article! It was too long, and I didn't have the time!

Thierer's point, I gather, is that as a society we're tending to care more about the parts of something and less about the whole. We are into snippets and smidgens and clips and tweets.

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I discovered a website this week called RinkWorks; its an entertainment website, one of its' offerings is that it serves up Book-A-Minute classics. On that page of their site we read,

\*\* "We at Book-A-Minute understand that your time is valuable. You want to experience the wonder and excitement of the fine art of literature, but reading actual books requires a significant time investment. We've got the solution for you. Our ultra-condensed books are just the ticket."

\*\*Here is the ultra-condensation of Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen:

*Mr. Darcy: Nothing is good enough for me.*

*Ms. Elizabeth Bennet: I could never marry that proud man.*

*(They change their minds.)*

THE END

\*\* And here's the classic Moby Dick –

*Ishmael: Call me Ishmael.*

*Captain Ahab: Crew, we will seek the white whale and kill it, because I am insane.*

*Crew: Alas, your destructive obsession will be our undoing.*

*(They almost find the white whale. Then they almost find the white whale. Then they find it.)*

*Captain Ahab: I stab at thee. I stab at thee.*

*(Everybody dies except Ishmael, although this is no surprise, because it was foreshadowed CONTINUALLY from the BEGINNING.)*

THE END

Now, this is meant to be funny (and I think it's hilarious) but there are probably some English 101 students who are poking each other and saying "what was the name of that Website?" (it's RinkWorks.com)

I noticed that on their list of ultra-condensed books, they didn't include the Bible. So, I thought I'd do you a service and take a shot at that one myself:

\*\* The Bible

In the beginning, God makes everything that is.

Humans go awry.

God brings them back.

Now, tell me – is this *wrong*? I mean, there might be a detail or two that is missing, but that pretty much covers the material, don't you think? So, really, why would we want to spend

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so much time... reading, studying, discussing...this huge, hard, Book? We know what it's about! Let's move on!

One of the writers at ChristianityToday.com (Stanley Grenz) a number of years ago made a fascinating observation about how we celebrate 'Christmas' in this world of sound bites, tweets, and instant messages.

\*\* He was thinking about the ubiquitous renditions of the song "The 12 Days of Christmas," usually sung by Tony Bennett and providing the background for so many shopping malls, and box stores... starting about a day after Halloween. And, Grenz says, watching shoppers dig through stacks of 'the right gifts at just the right price' so they could be Santa and not Scrooge made him realize just how deeply we've turned Christmas around – not by the commercializing the season, but something much deeper.

The ancient Western church came up with a rhythmic cycle to celebrate Christ's incarnation. (We call it the liturgical calendar.) At the center of this is Advent, beginning on the fourth Sunday before Christmas Day. Advent was meant to be a time of fasting, and abstaining from public festivities, and in doing this, Christians could prepare for the holy day by being drawn into the sense of longing for the Messiah's coming that was felt by generations of faithful people.

So this sense of anticipation would, then give way to overwhelming joy and celebration when Christmas Day finally arrived. Only *then* followed the '12 Days of Christmas', which climaxed on Jan 6, with Epiphany, the commemoration of the Magi's visit to Jesus. But Grenz points out that as part of our fast-food culture, we are so eager to get to Christmas that we kind of bypass Advent altogether.

So instead of fasting and reflection, we pack in more activities and festivities than we can almost endure! But more important than this, is that our attitude to the story of Christ's birth is also altered. And his point is, we know how the story ends, and in fact, we know it

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so well that we want to rush through the long and tortuous details of how God prepared a people, waiting for 'the time to fully come' (Gal. 4:4). So we skip a lot of the story.

\*\* He says, the irony of this is that we end up actually truncating the Christmas celebration. See, once December 25 is past, the holiday is done! Who, really, even *thinks* about stretching out the 12 Days of Christmas – until January 6? Well, we eliminate the need to do that by placing wise men next to the shepherds in our mangers (even though that never happened in history!)

So, we *have* our 12-plus days of Christmas, just like the song says. But in our impatience, we have transposed them. Christmas now *precedes* December 25. This allows us to avoid the stressful waiting, the longing expectation, of our forebears. All the painful and difficult parts, done! No problem!

But Grenz feels that all this diminishes the exuberant joy of that first Christmas, and he wonders if we can truly sing "Joy to the World" without having thoroughly rehearsed "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel?"<sup>1</sup> It's a good question... We'll come back to that thought in a few moments...

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\*\* (blank) In a New York Times article entitled "In One Ear and Out the Other," Natalie Angier examines the limited power of human memory. She points out something that we can all relate to - while we often can't quite seem to remember the birthday of a loved one, yet we remember every word of the Gilligan's Island theme song. Why is that? She says that it seems that if you add a little music to something, it's more likely to be remembered. That's how the brain is wired to work.

Dr. Michael Thaut, a professor of music and neuroscience at Colorado State University agrees with her, and gives this example. Imagine trying to get a room full of preschoolers to

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Grenz, "Drive-Through Christmas," [www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com) (12-06-99)

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memorize a sequence of 26 different letters? They have to be in the correct order. Practically impossible. But when the alphabet is set to the tune of the “ABC song” with its four melodic phrases, preschoolers can learn it with ease.<sup>2</sup>

So, there’s often a deep, hard-wired and frequently emotional connection between things we remember and music. I get that! Listening to songs that I connect with my high school/ or college days bring back not just memories but the *emotions* of those days of my life. In a similar way, I love Christmas music – love to hear different versions of familiar songs, and people’s new creative works. (I written a few myself.)

But for me, after a rather brief time, the “12 Days of Christmas’s” and the “Holly, Jolly Christmas’s” and the “Winter Wonderlands” quickly get stale... but there are some of our Advent/ Christmas hymns that never fail to touch the depths of my heart. Singing “O Come, O Come Immanuel” two weeks ago in our worship here ... I had trouble getting through all the verses. (Especially with the antiphons.)

\*\* Last week, hearing the congregation singing “O Come, All Ye Faithful” (and others) at all our services, it was a joyful and powerful time of worship for me (and, I know it was for you, too!) And the ‘high point’ for me will be at the end of each of our Christmas Eve services, when I look out at a sea of lit candles, and we sing “Silent Night. Holy Night, Son of God, Love’s pure light... radiant beams from thy holy face, with the dawn of redeeming grace... Christ the Savior is born!” Again, there is a *deep* connection between this very foundational truth of our lives, and the world we live in, and the music that describes it.

But we need to be careful... lest these songs become the ‘book-in-a-minute’ version of the truth for us. To the point that we end up with far less than we think we have.

\*\*You, of course, remember the story of the shepherds and the angels in Luke 2. We read this a few weeks ago, and it is the passage that comes immediately after the birth narrative

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<sup>2</sup> Natalie Angier, “In One Ear and Out the Other,” [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) (3-17-09)

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that we read this morning. Again, some shepherds are out in a field doing their ordinary jobs. Sheep are sleeping, or bleating, or grazing – whatever sheep do at night. The shepherds are warily searching through the darkness looking for any predators – two or four footed – that might want to hurt or steal the flock.

And out of ‘nowhere’ an *angel of the Lord* appears... the word ‘angel’ literally means ‘messenger’. So, a ‘messenger’ straight from God appears to these ‘nobodies’ (from our perspective). Day laborers. Grunts. And the message that this angel delivers is this,

*\*\*“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.”*

So the angel comes bearing the greatest news ever to these ... lowly shepherds.

Announcing, “The time of waiting is over! I bear Good News for all people! A Savior – the Messiah is born for you!”

Now, what happens next? That single angel is joined by hundreds... by thousands of other angels:

*\*\*“At once the angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God’s praises: Glory to God in the heavenly heights, Peace to all men and women on earth who please him.”* (The Message)

The quiet night sky is ripped open by the armies of heaven, and they’re singing God’s praises. The message of even the first Christmas was joined together with song, and it’s a song that we have never forgotten!

Now let me try to pull all this together... Because there really is a point to all these musings! In this culture that we’ve heard described today with terms like ‘fast-food’ culture, a culture of snippets, tweets, sound bites, books in a minute... a world where Advent has almost disappeared as we’ve transposed the traditional ‘12 Days of Christmas’ to the period of time between Thanksgiving and December 25... In a world where we just want to get to the bottom line, and when we do that, we move on to something else... in a season where that ‘bottom line’ is very much connected with the music...

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Let's be careful, lest the symbol becomes the reality. Let's be careful that we're not in such a hurry to get to the 'dessert' that we bypass the wonderful process of preparation of this meal that nourishes us for eternity.

Let's be careful... lest... well, think of it like this...

Back to those shepherds. The mighty angel choir has just finished singing. The fabric of heaven once more closes up, and once their eyes become re-accustomed to the darkness... what happens?

What if *this* was their conversation?

\*\* [Three shepherds all looking up at the sky, awestruck]

**Shepherd One:** "Wow...dude... that was, like, totally awesome!"

**Shepherd Two:** "Yeah... what a light show, too!"

I haven't seen anything like that since...*EV-er!*"

**Shepherd Three:** (PAUSE) "Cool song, too. Not real danceable, but it was catchy."

(Others agree) (PAUSE)

**Shepherd One:** "Ok, I'm gonna call it a day, I'm pretty tired."

**Shepherds Two & Three:** "Hey, good-night!"

(# ONE STARTS WALKING SLOWLY AWAY. THEN TURNS AROUND AND SAYS...)

**Shepherd One:** "You know, this really was a great night. What do you say we get together, next year, on this same night? We can sing that song again, and put out some lights – you know, so we don't forget any of this!"

**Shepherds Two & Three:** Great idea! Let's do it!

**Shepherd One** (WALKING AWAY)... "Ok, Next year, then! It will be awesome!"

Well, (fortunately) that wasn't the way it went down! Instead, what we read in Luke 2:15 is

*\*\* When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."*

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\*\* Christmas can very quickly become a season of fragments. Nuggets... beautiful nuggets, stand alone fragments – dinners, gifts, lights, parties, traditions, and maybe especially ... music. But then for so many, on December 26 it's all packed up, put away, to await next year's attempt to re-capture that elusive 'Christmas magic'...

Friends, what about you? See, what happened on that first Christmas night, the truth that we celebrate this time every year is not a 'stand alone historical event', something to look at, admire and move on to the next thing. Christmas is a beginning - its the invitation - to a journey. It is the first day of a new way of life, a way TO life that God is offering to 'all people'. If we put it all away on December 26... it's kind of like a couple that are wildly in love. And they have an elaborate wedding - no holds barred, nothing left to chance, no expenses spared. What a day!

But at the end of the day... they go their separate ways, they don't talk or visit each other (unless there's an emergency of some sort)... until their anniversary rolls around. And *then* they get together, look at wedding pictures and videos, have a meal and some cake... and they do this year after year after year. That anniversary might well be the high point of the year for both of them... but, really, do you think there just might be something missing? Do you think that there might be *more* in store for them?

But, if we, too, (like the shepherds) see through the externals – to the core of the Message – if we can somehow grasp that these beautiful symbols point to an even more beautiful *reality, a personal reality*, and like them decide, “I need to go and see this for myself! **I'm going now!**” eternity opens up to us... and nothing will never be the same!

\*\* May the peace of the baby who came as Immanuel to live as one of us, who grew up to heal us, to die for us, and who lives and reigns to intercede for us, may this be our focus not only in this Christmas season, but every day of our lives. **Amen.**