

Yesterday I posted an article that I wrote that provided one view of Christmas, one that is informed more by my scholarship than anything else. But Christmas is about a LOT more than scholarship! I have a personal sentimental attachment to the season, as I explain in this other article I wrote some ten years ago, and that I posted early on in the history of the blog. Here it is again, a more upbeat assessment of the season:

Growing up as a church-going Episcopalian in Kansas, my favorite time of year was always Christmas. Nothing could match the romance of the season: the cold weather, the falling of snow, the expectations leading up to the Big Day. I always loved the presents — giving as well as receiving — the music, the food, the tree. Especially the tree. It had to be real — freshly cut if possible; loaded with lights, the more the better; draped with ornaments, each of them full of meaning. There was nothing better than darkening the room and sitting in rapt contemplation before the tree as it glowed with its bright, multi-colored lights. It was a kind of hallowed moment, reverent, silent.

My faith in God began to slip away as I moved into my 30s. I had shifted from being a reasonably devout Episcopalian, to becoming a born-again Christian, to being an ultra-conservative evangelical. But graduate studies in the New Testament began to take their toll on my faith, as I began to see that the revered words of the Bible were not infallible but were, in fact, very human words. They were copied by human scribes, who often altered the words when they copied them; and they had been originally written by human authors, who naturally allowed their own views, beliefs, perspectives, situations, loves, hates, and passions affect what they wrote. And I began having trouble believing that a good God could be in charge of a world filled with such pain and suffering: famine, drought, war, earthquakes, mudslides, hurricanes, tsunamis. I moved from being a conservative evangelical to being a liberal evangelical to being a liberal non-evangelical to becoming an agnostic. And that's where I am now. For now. It may seem sad to have lost one's faith, but on the other hand, I'm happy, very happy, with my life, my career, my amazing wife, my loving family. I'm one of the luckiest people on the face of the earth, despite what I've lost.

One of the things I haven't lost, oddly enough, is my love of Christmas. I no longer believe the Christmas story told every year. I now know that the story of Jesus' birth in the Gospel of Matthew is very different from the story in the Gospel of Luke, that their accounts are not simply differently nuanced, but factually at odds. And I know that we don't have their original accounts, but only the accounts as handed down by scribes who often changed the accounts, making it sometimes impossible to know what the originals said. In one sense, I've lost something of the wonder of Jesus coming into the world, for I now realize that the biblical narratives are not history, but are in fact, stories.

But they are beautiful stories. Angelic visitors, heavenly inspired dreams, miraculous works: a virgin conceives and bears a son! There are shepherds and wise men and wicked kings and murdering soldiers and near escapes; tragedy and salvation.

The stories live on, with or without my faith in them as history. And the meaning of the stories continues to touch me. This is a season of giving: God giving his son, the wise men giving their gifts, the Son giving his life, and his followers giving themselves. It is a season of brightness, of music, of reflection, a season of winter and snow and Christmas trees with lights to be observed with rapt contemplation.



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