

RE-THINKING THE WONDERS OF CHRISTMAS

by John Bennisson

Note: this Christmas Commentary is written in the context of the holiday observance, and as a requiem for the slaughter of the innocents at a place now known to us all as Sandy Hook.



Right: Unidentified icon of
Madonna and the Child; and the Crucified Christ

PRELUDE

In July, 1933, singer-songwriter John Jacob Niles found himself in the small Appalachian town of Murphy, North Carolina. He came across a gathering of evangelicals who'd been run out of town by the local police. He watched as a young girl, whose name was Annie Morgan, stepped up the edge of a small platform attached to a vehicle. As he would later recollect in his autobiography:

"She began to sing. Her clothes were unbelievable dirty and ragged, and she, too, was unwashed. Her ash-blond hair hung down in long skeins.... But, best of all, she was beautiful, and in her untutored way, she could sing. She smiled as she sang, smiled rather sadly, and sang only a single line of a song."

I wonder as I wander out under the sky ...

As she sang, repeating the line over and over, additional lines of a verse and the fragments of an extended melody came to Niles.

*I wonder as I wander out under the sky ...
Why Jesus the savior did come for to die
For poor ornery people like you and like I?
I wonder as I wander out under the sky.*

Later, Niles would add the two additional stanzas, to become the familiar American Christmas carol. But at the heart of the rather mournful and haunting tune the puzzling question remains. Why -- despite popular Christianity's doctrinaire explanations -- was a Galilean peasant child's fate sealed even before he drew his first breath? Was the only reason for the birth of Mary and Joseph's child -- God's greatest gift and blessing to them -- simply so he could die a miserable death; and somehow thereby make up for all the wretchedness in folks like you and me?

And what was Jesus' consolation? That he is was not only the sacrificial Lamb of God, but is God's "son," and somehow even God "himself?" But if that is so, then isn't he not only the very incarnation of God, but the abdication of all those absolutes (those "omni-everythings") we like to attribute to God, as well? After all, "if he'd wanted for any wee thing," as the song goes, "he surely could have had it," if he was the king.

Like little Annie Morgan, I wonder as I wander, about such nonsense.

I wonder: Since Jesus came into this world, just as every child of every mother and father comes into this world, then did he come with the same reason we came, as children of God; with that same spark of divinity that, in him, became a living light to this ornery, dark and shabby world?

And, if he were to come again, bearing the likeness of God, would he really come merely to *judge* this sorry world; simply to determine who would supposedly inherit the next? Or instead, bearing the light and likeness of God, is it up to us to instead hear his voice, follow where he has already led us, and transform the only world there is?

I wonder if we ought to reconsider another way to the manger, and rethink what kind of Christmas we ought to not only eagerly expect, pray and hope for most especially this year; but be as midwives to its birthing, as well?

Given the recent events of Sandy Hook that can't help but muffle the merriment of the Christmas season, we might do well to re-think the harsher realities of the original Christmas tale that has been retold again this season in such a stark and sober reckoning.

A WONDER-FULL CHRISTMAS?

A week after the onslaught of this year's Black Friday's kick-off to the national holiday shopping frenzy, the Rhode Island governor's office announced at 11:31 AM on November 29th that the annual tree-lighting ceremony would be held twenty nine minutes later, at high noon in the state capitol building.

The reason for the short notice was meant to pre-empt a repeat of last year's disruption, when protesters objected to Gov. Chafee's generic reference to the "Holiday Tree," instead of the more traditional term "Christmas Tree." While the Gov said he himself would have a *Christmas* tree in his own home, he believed a more inclusive term was appropriate for the government building shared by people of all faiths, or no faith whatsoever.

In response to the sparsely attended event, the state's leading Roman Catholic hierarch, Bishop Thomas Tobin, suggested the "Gov" should instead have respected the "heartfelt sentiments of the vast majority of Rhode Islanders" by calling the 17-ft high spruce a *Christmas* tree. Never mind the inconvenient fact such holiday décor is utterly pagan in origin, I guess. But such is just one of the many "wonders of Christmas" this year. So it got me wondering what other puzzlement could be found?

One thing I apparently won't have to wonder and worry so much about is what I might get for Christmas. If my beloved fails to come through, happy retailers report the rising popularity of a recent trend known as "self-gifting." For every present I buy someone else, I'm encouraged to go ahead and pamper myself with another gift for lil' 'ol me. After all, whether I've been ornery or nice, apparently I deserve it.

And, if I have buyer's remorse over any of my trinkets and bobbles, there's always the now well-established modern tradition of "re-gifting." If I were to draw your name in the Secret Santa gift exchange, for instance, I could unload some of the stuff I neither want or need.

But of all the crazy things I've always wondered about Christmas, there are those that have made little sense to me from childhood on. So here are a few holiday gifts that are yours to keep or return as you wish.

First there's the whole, honest to goodness truth the Christmas story is pure myth.

The second is this nonsense that the only reason a baby was once born to some poor peasant parents in some backwater province of the Empire in the 1st century CE, was so he could die a miserable death; purportedly on my behalf.

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And third is this incredible concoction that the messiah of God not only made his first appearance as the baby Jesus; but that he's coming back again – as a 4th century creed recited to this day by many 20th century Christians -- to judge the living and the dead.

Apparently, it wasn't sufficiently miraculous enough for two millennia of believing Christians that a deity would so gracefully manifest a way of life in one who would dwell among us with the wisdom and compassion of all we would subsequently deem to call divine.

So here in a little more detail are a few things to consider; along with a sobering look at what certainly remains of this Christmas message, given the recent slaughter of the innocents that continue to this day.

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MYTH BUSTERS

A national organization of Atheists has a huge billboard in Times Square this year depicting the two images of Santa Claus and a crucified Jesus. The caption reads "Keep the Merry, Dump the Myth."

Their point is obvious, but the irony of course is that in their effort to debunk any divinity from being attributed to the crucified Jesus they avail themselves of Saint Nicholas, a 4th century bishop of the Christian faith from what is now modern day Turkey. Not only that, but the evidence of at least regarding the execution of a 1st century Galilean peasant rabbi named Jesus is pretty much an accepted historical fact.

At the same time, I'll readily concede the Christmas story is a wonderful, mythic tale. As it's related in two different canonical gospels, we have two different stories that are complete fabrications; with no factual evidence of how Jesus actually came into this world.

In other words, the infancy narratives provided in the canonical scriptures are imaginary tales and pure myths in the best sense of that term; as they are meant to convey certain assertions of truths for which factual evidence is hardly the point. Once we accept the Christmas story as a wonderful mythic tale we can then get on with the business of re-thinking just what is so wondrous about it, or not.

But while the story of Jesus' birth in any version is purely mythic, it is not magical. Like any great myth it tells a story that is not only full of wonder in its imaginings; but conveys certain truths by which we might be willing to have our lives and world view shaped by something deemed more important than mere facts. And the most important fact for us to remember, perhaps, is that we live by myths.

So, the most important question for us may be to ask by which myths do we choose to live our lives?



MYTH-MAKERS

Matthew and Luke's nativity accounts) not only provide mythic tales by which they frame the life and death of Jesus as messiah; but the context in which the messianic reign of God is taught and lived in the life and teachings of the Galilean spirit / sage, as well.

But when our Atheist friends choose to debunk any Christian claims to the Christmas holiday, it is peculiarly apt that they choose the image of Jesus hanging on a cross. It begs the same question little Annie Morgan wondered about so many years ago when she sang her mournful tune.

And, in fact, it must have been the same bewildering and terrifying question the first followers of Jesus must have asked in the earliest decades that followed his execution, burial and claimed "resurrection." For resurrection is where *gospel story* as *myth* really sets our heads spinning with a search for meaning beyond factual assertions and historical evidence.

For anyone like myself, for whom a physical resuscitation of a corpse is inconsequential for any set of beliefs, the meaning of both Jesus' birth and death does not require adherence to a predominant line of thinking so often expected and assumed for "right-thinking" Christians.

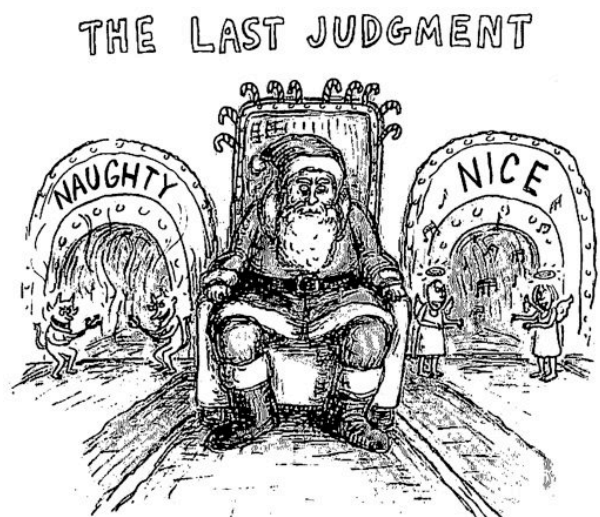
Jesus wasn't born, just so he could die; any more than any child is born. More so, he did not, by his death, somehow make up for all my failures and shortcomings, and thereby "save" me for all eternity with "Him" in some unearthly realm. Neither was he, nor his executioners, merely pawns in some divine morality play. He died at the hands of the state, as a consequence of his teachings and behaviors that were considered unorthodox and heretical by the religious establishment, and subversive by the political power structure.

The notion that Jesus was born merely to "save" me by his death is a sorry tale that fails to provide any kind of meaning; and therefore is not a persuasive myth. For me, the mythic tale of Jesus coming into this world with the innocence of a holy child at Christmas is of quite another sort. Before getting to that, though, there is the matter of Jesus' "second coming."

COME AGAIN?

In the Common Lectionary, Year C, gospel readings during the Advent season (posted at the end of this commentary), one finds a mix of poetic hope and longing, alternating with eschatological forebodings of the imminent end of things as they are; to be replaced with the reestablishment of what God intended from the start. The coming of the Christ child at Christmas (along with his death, resurrection and "ascension") is sometimes touted to be but the prelude to his second coming (literally) and the end of the world.

If you buy that, then he's also coming back as our atheist friend's Santa Claus, to judge who's been naughty and nice.



R. U. S.
The New Yorker, Dec. 10, 2012

It is as if his first time wasn't enough; when he lived among us, and travelled from town to town, preaching, and teaching, and healing anyone whom he encountered by chance. The wonder-filled tale of his birth, life and death wasn't sufficient evidence of the kind of intimate relationship any parent has with the child; demonstrating love, compassion, forgiveness and mercy, regardless of the consequences.

We know what the deadly consequences were for such a "living Word," to use the image of the Johannine prologue . We know how difficult it is to accept his invitation to similarly live such a consequential life; instead of the ways we so often live our lives that are safe and self-serving, but of little consequence.

As the gospels all relate it, Jesus didn't come to save himself. He came to lose himself for the sake of the other; and simply treat others with compassion, just as you would want to be treated. The Christmas story that begins the way the world responds is the first half of a passion play that ends on Calvary. He wasn't born, simply to die. But he also needn't come again to show us what we have already seen and heard from the story.

How then might we wonder about what the Christmas story has to say to us this year?

We know what the deadly consequences were for him. And we know how difficult it is to accept his invitation to similarly live such a consequential life; instead of the ways we so often live our lives that are safe and self-serving, but of little consequence.

ASIL'S STORY

If you were to drive north a mere 26 km on the main road from the town of Bethlehem to the Jewish settlement of Anatot in modern day Israel you'd pass the Mount of Olives off to your right, and Jerusalem's Old City part just off to the west. Beyond the Separation Wall that carves its way through the territory is the nearby Palestinian village of Anata.

One afternoon last January a four-year old girl in braids, named Asil Arara, was playing in a field near the Wall and the Anata Forest, when her 10-year old cousin heard a gunshot ring out and came running. Asil lay on the ground, bleeding and paralyzed. A bullet from somewhere, fired by someone, had struck her in the back of the neck.

The story was recently related to me by Michael Cooper, a devout Jew and pediatric cardiologist from Northern California, who periodically travels to the occupied territories to serve the medical needs of Palestinian children. [See the Commentary "A TALE OF TWO CITIES: JERUSALEM, NOW AND WHEN?" Sept. 2012]. As my friend describes it,

The Palestinian village of Anata has seen violence before. Trapped by the Wall to the west and Area C, under Israeli control to the east, life in the village remains just as paralyzed by the Wall, check points, and a permit regime that limits Palestinian access to school, family, work, farmland and health care. Recently, men and women of the village were beaten when they attempted to cultivate their land bordering Anatot. The Jewish settlers poured out of their homes, beating the villagers with clubs and pistol butts, while Israeli police looked on. And now this — the shooting of a four-year-old child.

Our team met her by chance — in the pediatric intensive care unit at Makassed Hospital in East Jerusalem where we'd come to do a cardiac consult on another child. As a group of doctors and nurses from the UK and the US, we're here on a medical mission—to provide heart surgery for Palestinian children living under occupation—an occupation going on its fifth decade.



Michael went on to relate how after his return to Northern California he received the report little Asil had lingered five months before succumbing to her injury.

I looked again at the photograph of this child. She appeared to have such a haunting and bewildered look on her face; as her body lay limp and lingering on the verge of death. What on earth, I wondered to myself, could possibly explain – let alone justify – a single bullet. I wondered, how could this be the only reason this child was ever born?

The other image Michal sent me was of Asil's mother sitting alongside her child's hospital bed. It was the telling tableau of the Madonna and child in a modern day nativity scene. Because this is what the real Christmas story looks like again to this year.



If you think about it, it's not all that much different than the first sad tale of Christmas in Bethlehem, or the one from a place called Anata. Or Newtown.

For Asil's name could just as well have been Charlotte, or Allison, Benjamin, Victoria, May, Lauren, Avielle, Jessica, Caroline, Noah, Jack, Emilie, Anne, Grace, James, Jesse, Catherine, Madeleine, Dawn, Dylan, Ana, Josephine, Olivia, Rachel, or Daniel. The first nativity story included the slaughter of the innocents. And the Christmas story has been told once again in these last few days.

It was the telling tableau of the Madonna and child in a modern day nativity scene. Because this is what the real Christmas story looks like again to this year.

And I wonder. I wonder amidst all the *wonders* of Christmas what we might finally do – not just say, but do – to live a different story; a story that might once and for all be truly filled with awe and wonder, instead of such dread and death.

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Advent Season – Common Lectionary, Year C

Four Gospel Readings from the Christian scriptures, the Gospel of Luke, appointed for the **Advent Season Common Lectionary, Year C.**

Per the Jesus Seminar scholars consensus regarding the authenticity of words attributed to Jesus:

- **RED:** yep, quite likely or certainly Jesus
- **PINK:** possibly, it sounds like him, perhaps with some slight modification by the gospel writer
- **GREY:** probably not original material once uttered by Jesus, but rather subsequently attributed to him in light of early believers experiences, reflecting their belief Jesus is messiah (Christ)" or
- **BLACK:** Nope, we cannot ascertain the historical Jesus ever actually said this. Rather it was likely one of numerous theological developments in the gospel compilations of the emerging church; stemming, in retrospect, from their own historical context and experience.

Advent I - Luke 21:25-36

Brief Commentary:

Luke borrows heavily from Mark's earlier gospel for this source material (Mark 4:24-27, drawing on apocalyptic imagery in the book of Daniel). Having already recently lived through the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman's far superior military force, the cataclysmic scenes depicted are as understandable in terms of today's headlines as they would have been in Luke's time. Most biblical scholars completely agree none of this passage attributed to Jesus was likely ever uttered by the historical figure. It is Luke's early believing community trying to make sense out of an uncertain future, as a result of what has already come to pass. Jesus came once to Bethlehem (according to Luke's infancy narrative), and ended up nailed to a cross outside Jerusalem. When and how might he ever come again? Note the fierce some, retributive, even vengeful image of judgment that concludes the section as is called "good" news! It not only leaves one asking Good News for whom, but what kind of "Son of Man" is this who will come again?

Reading:

"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Adam [some translations use Son of Man] coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near.

So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth."

Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Advent II - Luke 1:68-79

Brief Commentary:

If the first passage from Luke sounds harsh and judgmental (which it is), the second one which comes towards to beginning of Luke's gospel tale is sheer poetry. When nosy neighbors question Elizabeth's choice for her son's name, Zechariah's tongue is loosed to sing this poetic canticle, pronouncing his son's name shall be John, and be the forerunner to Jesus. John's role is described as "prophet to the Most High," and Jesus – without being named, or even present, but only assumed – is to be the fulfillment of long-awaited messianic hope and expectation. In loftiest terms he begins with giving glory to God for the savior's coming, then tenderly addresses his own son John.

Reading:

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.

By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Advent III - Luke 3:7-18

Brief Commentary:

John the Baptizer is sometimes called the last prophet of the Old Testament, given the way he is characterized in the gospels. His father's kind description of his boy gives way to the prophet's harsh call for repentance. Again the theme of judgement and a second coming is reiterated.

Reading:

He (John) said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." ...

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Advent IV - Luke 1:46b-55

Brief Commentary:

Luke returns to the poetic. Mary is not merely the icon of surrender and obedience to God's will, as is often touted; but the defiant spokesperson for all the powerless and suppressed, the marginalized and disenfranchised. The one least likely to be heard is given voice to proclaim God's reign will not be deterred by all that would strive to snuff it out. The 'Magnificat' is magnificent in its subversive message that is both ancient and eternal.

Reading:

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."



**PATHWAYS
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"God is a direction." - Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke