

## Nothing Bad Ever Happens on Christmas

“Nothing bad ever happens on Christmas.” This was the refrain on a recent episode of the new hit TV show *This Is Us*, a drama which follows the lives of 36-year-old siblings in 2016 and in flashbacks to the 1980s. The holiday episode featured hospital visits, family feuds, and relationship struggles, but throughout the turmoil, everyone held firm to the conviction that everything would turn out okay because the laws of the universe would not allow tragedies to occur at a time so joy-filled as Christmas.

Many of us likely share these fictional TV characters’ sentiment, even if life has challenged us to think differently. As lovely as Christmas can be--the music, the decorations, the family and friends togetherness, the food, the spirit--we also carry pain and uncertainty into the celebration. Perhaps we have already experienced bad things happening on or around Christmas--the loss of loved one, miscarriages, breakups--or we recognize how most of the world’s violence and strife does not cease on December 25 in order to mark Christ’s entrance into the world. Perhaps we approach 2017 not with anticipation but dread. Tragedies (or even the less dramatic but no less painful aches and longings for a better life or better world) unfortunately do not wait until January. The closing scene of the Christmas episode of *This Is Us* featured doctors performing emergency surgery on a regular character who had collapsed from a heart attack.

When we tell the Christmas story, we usually omit King Herod, or mention him only in passing. Christmas pageants and nativity sets typically do not include a King Herod, and without a Herod, or a villain, Christ’s birth becomes utterly charming and quaint. King Herod is the something bad, and we do not want to let him ruin Christmas. Yet the story only comes alive and takes on its full meaning if we include him and his evil. Isaiah prophesies that people who have walked and lived in darkness have received a great light, and darkness indeed was the experience of Baby Jesus’ fellow people.

It is in the Gospel of Matthew that we learn most about Herod and his desire to protect his power. This ruler executed his wife, his

brother-in-law, and three of his sons because he thought they wanted his crown. In Jesus' time, Herod ordered the death of every boy in Bethlehem two years old and younger. Angels warned Joseph in a dream to run for safety with his baby Jesus, but how many mothers and fathers did not receive a warning and were left to defend their little ones from the soldiers knocking on their doors? King Herod then sends magi to visit the Baby Jesus and report back, but the magi too are warned in a dream not to return to Herod. Threats follow Jesus throughout his life, from before his birth until his tragic death. Evil threatens good, darkness threatens light. This is the reality to which our gospel witnesses.

In Luke's gospel, we hear less about Herod, and instead find out that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus must register for the census. While there are some questions about how Luke's account agrees (or doesn't) with historical data, and what exactly this particular census meant, this plot point is significant. Luke's census, at best, indicated the exploitation and excessive taxation that would befall the vast majority of those who lived under the Roman regime, and at worst, foreshadowed King Herod's plan to rid himself of any competition for the throne. It is no wonder that Mary's and Joseph's and the shepherds' and every other major actor in the Christmas story's reaction is fear. They lived in dark, uncertain times, always worried about what those in power would do next.

Even during Jesus' ministry, we see the darkness. Jesus heals those who never deserved to be sick--and who were blamed for their illness, since in the first century outward disease was believed to be an indication of an impure soul. Jesus feeds the poor who work endlessly but cannot escape from the crushing oppression of Rome's taxes. Jesus experiences betrayal by one of his friends, Judas, which costs him his life. Jesus, in other words, sees the very worst of our world.

It is against this sorrow and fear that Christmas gains its splendor. All Advent season, we lit the Advent wreath, gradually adding more light, one candle at a time, to demonstrate how Christ enters a dark world. Christmas is a happy time, yes, but it says something about us our situation that we need Christmas at all. Christmas is God's response to

our cries. Jesus Christ comes to the worst places and the most painful circumstances to share our suffering, to care for us in the midst of despair and imperfection. We have not been left alone.

What adding King Herod or the darkness back into the Christmas story and acknowledging that bad things do happen on Christmas allow is a more authentic relationship with Jesus. Nothing can break the magic of Christmas, because part of Christmas's allure is that it is deep and complex and profound. With each passing year, our Christmases will become more complicated because we endure more heartbreak and loss and ambiguity. Loved ones leave us, relationships end, and regrets haunt us. We carry these thoughts as we open Christmas cards, overindulge on holiday dinners, and enjoy the next generation delight in Santa. The Christian story is not one-note like a Hallmark Christmas movie (although I admit that I watch an embarrassing number during December). No amount of sadness or gloom or evil or malice will scare away Jesus because Jesus has already penetrated the depths of our existence. Joy and pain may co-exist, and in fact, almost always do. We find Jesus in the meeting of the two, and every Christmas, we remember that the light shines even in the darkness. It shines oh so brightly.

Isaiah 9:2-7

The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness--  
on them light has shined.  
You have multiplied the nation,  
you have increased its joy;  
they rejoice before you  
as with joy at the harvest,  
as people exult when dividing plunder.  
For the yoke of their burden,  
and the bar across their shoulders,

the rod of their oppressor,  
you have broken as on the day of Midian.  
For all the boots of the tramping warriors  
and all the garments rolled in blood  
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.  
For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
His authority shall grow continually,  
and there shall be endless peace  
for the throne of David and his kingdom.  
He will establish and uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness  
from this time onward and forevermore.  
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

## **Psalm 96**

### *Cantate Domino*

- 1 Sing to the Lord a new song; \*  
sing to the Lord, all the whole earth.
- 2 Sing to the Lord and bless his Name; \*  
proclaim the good news of his salvation from day to day.
- 3 Declare his glory among the nations \*  
and his wonders among all peoples.
- 4 For great is the Lord and greatly to be praised; \*  
he is more to be feared than all gods.
- 5 As for all the gods of the nations, they are but idols; \*  
but it is the Lord who made the heavens.
- 6 Oh, the majesty and magnificence of his presence! \*  
Oh, the power and the splendor of his sanctuary!

7 Ascribe to the Lord, you families of the peoples; \*  
ascribe to the Lord honor and power.

8 Ascribe to the Lord the honor due his Name; \*  
bring offerings and come into his courts.

9 Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness; \*  
let the whole earth tremble before him.

10 Tell it out among the nations: "The Lord is King! \*  
he has made the world so firm that it cannot be moved;  
he will judge the peoples with equity."

11 Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad;  
let the sea thunder and all that is in it; \*  
let the field be joyful and all that is therein.

12 Then shall all the trees of the wood shout for joy  
before the Lord when he comes, \*  
when he comes to judge the earth.

13 He will judge the world with righteousness \*  
and the peoples with his truth.

### **Titus 2:11-14**

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

### **Luke 2:1-14(15-20)**

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see-- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

[When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.]