

Series: Christ's Gifts that Turn Our World Right-side Up
#4: Hope in the Midst of Despair
Luke 2:1-20 and 1 Peter 1:3-9 NRSV
By John Gill

Way back in the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, on April 9th, an opinion piece appeared in the New York Times that has proved to be prophetic. Entitled, "When the Pandemic Leaves Us Alone, Anxious and Depressed¹," Andrew Solomon, a professor of medical clinical psychology at Columbia University Medical Center, wrote of the stresses and feelings of hopelessness all of us would endure if the pandemic continues for an extended period of time – which, of course, it has. This is what Professor Solomon wrote:

"A new poll from the Kaiser Family Foundation found nearly half of respondents said their mental health was being harmed by the coronavirus pandemic. Nearly everyone I know has been thrust in varying degrees into grief, panic, hopelessness and paralyzing fear. If you say (to someone), "I'm so terrified I can barely sleep," people may reply, "What sensible person isn't?" But that response can cause us to lose sight of the dangerous secondary crisis unfolding alongside the more obvious one: an escalation in both short-term and long-term clinical mental illness that may endure for decades after the pandemic recedes."¹

Now that we are ten months into this pandemic, we can all attest to the accuracy of Dr. Solomon's prediction. Hopefully, most of us have been able to avoid "clinical mental illness," but all of us know first-hand the emotional stresses 2020 has caused us. Who among us hasn't experienced "grief, panic, hopelessness and paralyzing fear" this year? Even as we see some people receiving inoculations, and we are encouraged that things will be better in 2021, we've lived with a sense of hopelessness for so long, that it's hard for us to shake it. This pervasive gloom has only been amplified during this holiday season, as we have had to choose between being with our loved ones or spending Thanksgiving and Christmas alone. Let's be honest – Christmas in 2020 just isn't as joyful for us as it is most years. Its easy for us to lose hope.

And yet, on this Christmas Eve, we have chosen "Hope" as our theme. In what way does the coming of the Christ-child bring us hope in the midst of our despair? Or another way to ask the same question is this: Why is it some people experience Christmas as an empty meaningless tradition, while for others, the celebration of the birth of Jesus gives them hope and joy – even when the circumstances of their lives may appear hopeless?

Which describes your experience of Christmas? I believe the difference lies in two little words: "to" and "in."

This insight came to me recently as our Choir was putting together our virtual recordings of Christmas Carols to use during Advent and Christmas. Each choir member sings and records their own part and emails them to Megan, who through the wonders of computer technology, combines them so that it sounds like we were all together when we recorded them. (We thank our choir, and especially Megan, for making music available for our worship during these months of social distancing.)

Anyway, as I was recording the carol, “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” I took notice of the lyrics of the final verse in a new way. Oh – I had sung this carol hundreds of times down through the years, as you have, but I had never paid attention to the use of those two little words: “to” and “in.”

The first sentence of that final verse says everything we need to know about how Christmas gives us hope - and it all hinges on these two little prepositions - “to” and “in.”

Let me refresh your memory of how that last verse reads:

O holy Child of Bethlehem
Descend to us, we pray.
Cast out our sin and enter in
Be born in us today.

TO - verses - IN. You may think I’ve lost my mind – that I’m just nit-picking. What difference does it make? It makes all the difference in the world! Whether Christmas is just a nice tradition that has no impact on your life, or it gives your whole life meaning and hope – depends on which of these two little words describes your relationship with Jesus.

O holy Child of Bethlehem – descend TO us – be born IN us... One is a statement of fact, the other a statement of faith. One is our history, the other is our hope.

During the Advent Season, we spent weeks reflecting on the longing of the Jewish people for God to send them a Messiah, one anointed to bring salvation to Israel. The coming of this Messiah was foretold by prophets down through the centuries as people prayed for the very moment you and I celebrate this evening. We retell the story every Christmas, of the angels appearing to those frightened shepherds watching their flocks: “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord...”

Did you catch that? - that little word again – “to;” “TO you is born...” For countless generations, the Jewish people had prayed that God’s Messiah might finally “Descend to (them)...” And, on that starry Christmas night, the angels declared that those faithful prayers had been finally answered: “To you is born this day...a Savior...” A statement of fact – a moment in history.

Most people in our nation and our world acknowledge that Jesus was born some 2000 years ago. They recognize as historical fact that Jesus clashed with the Jewish authorities of his day, and that the Romans executed him on a cross. And while they may not believe that Jesus was the divine Son of God, they don’t question that he was a Jewish teacher and prophet, sent by God. So, in some sense, they may accept the historical claim of the Christmas carol, that Jesus “descended TO” the world. Maybe that describes you.

People like that probably celebrate Christmas. They enjoy the traditions, the decorations, and warm fuzzy feeling Christmas gives us. They may love the parties, the food, and the gifts, and the time spent with loved ones and friends. They may even attend a Christmas Eve service. But, once Christmas comes and goes, they are not changed. The Holy Child of Bethlehem has made his annual “decent to us,” – we nod in recognition of the fact of his coming. Then we pack up Baby Jesus with the Christmas decorations and store him in the attic gathering dust until next Thanksgiving. Until then, out of sight, out of mind.

O Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend TO us, we pray. Yes, we all thank God for the coming of Jesus TO the world in a moment in history. We sing, “Joy TO the world, the Lord is Come!” And that’s great!

But that’s not enough! If we are to experience hopefulness on this dark Christmas Eve, we want – no, we need – a more profound experience of Jesus than that. Christ descended to the world – and that is amazing news! We need him to come to us... to “cast out our sin, and enter in” – to scatter our darkness with his holy light. But it’s not enough that Jesus “descend TO us.” We must invite Jesus to “be born IN us, today.”

You see, the only way the birth of Jesus makes any difference in our lives – the only way Christmas brings us the hope we need – is when Christ is “born IN us.”

For our second lesson on this Christmas Eve, I chose a text that may have sounded out of place this time of year – a reading from the first letter of Peter. While unusual for Christmas Eve, these words of Peter, written to Christians in the early church who were going through a time of suffering and persecution, are amazingly appropriate for us in our time of pandemic, discouragement and gloom. Listen again to what the Apostle tells us is the source of our hope, even in a time of sorrow and despair:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy **he has given us a new birth into a living hope** through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”

My friends, this is the secret to finding hope in the midst of despair. This is the true meaning of Christmas. As we invite the “Holy Child of Bethlehem to be born IN us,” God gives US “a new birth – He gives us – a living hope.”

There is a song written and recorded by Terry Scott Taylor, called, “May I Be Your Bethlehem?”² I believe it expresses powerfully, the difference between “to” and “in.”

Most high and holy Lord was born so meek and mild
God with us, Emmanuel, became a little child
Please Holy God, come fill my soul and set this captive free
(May my) heart become your Bethlehem Christ is born in me

The Son of God came down to us and walked the blood-soaked earth
(Where he) died on Calvary’s poisoned tree to give us second birth
Please Holy God come fill my soul and set this captive free
(May my) heart become your Bethlehem when Christ is born in me...

Lord make my heart a manger, birth in me your Son
(Place) in my flesh the evidence Emmanuel has come
Please Holy God, come fill my soul and set this captive free
(May my) heart become your Bethlehem when Christ is born in me. ²

Growing up, I sang in the Cherub Choir. We didn't sing that song (it wasn't even written yet, of course). But we sang a much simpler song, you may also have sung as a child. It is really the child's version of that very same prayer. May it be our prayer this Christmas Eve. Sing along with me if you know it:

Into my heart, into my heart. Come into my heart, Lord Jesus.
Come in today, come in to stay. Come into my heart, Lord Jesus.

Did you PRAY it?
Did you MEAN it?

O holy Child of Bethlehem
Descend to us, we pray.
Cast out our sin and enter in
Be born in us today.

Amen.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/09/opinion/sunday/coronavirus-depression-anxiety.html>

² <http://targuman.org/2016/12/24/christmas-the-day-your-heart-became-bethlehem/>