

As Christmas season careens to a close and we limp into 2021, many aren't feeling overly merry or jolly. It may be the most wonderful time of the year, but we'll be glad when 2020 is finally over.

I doubt that any of us thought last year when we celebrated the season, that in a year this strange word called COVID would up-end and infect so much of our lives. Even as the virus began to spread, none of us thought *Pandemic Easter* would turn into a *COVID Christmas*, and yet here we are.

It's been a tough year. Natural disasters. A global pandemic. Racial tension and rioting. A divisive election. Probably a dozen other things that would grab headlines in a normal year. It's easy to struggle with having Christmas cheer. Some are mourning deep losses. Every one of the nearly 2 million worldwide COVID-19 deaths have a name, a family and a face. There will be empty places at far too many tables this year.

And the economic pain has been shattering. Lost businesses. Lost jobs. Lost retirement. It's estimated that 100,000 restaurants will never re-open. Kids who assumed a year of school and friends and summer camps and graduation have been forced to spend so much time, in their formative years, staring at a screen, forging community through their cameras.

This Christmas, more than any in recent memory, means loneliness, hardship, and pain. For many, Zoom and Facebook Live replaces the warmth, hugs and handshakes of the holiday. Yet while we Christians might lament, we must not despair. It's precisely in this season that we most need Christmas. Christmas is just what God ordered for a broken world. Let me share on this Christmas Eve some timely takeaways from the incarnation of the Son of God for 2020:

Jesus came into a troubled world. You don't have to read very far into the Gospel narratives to see the pain and longing seeping up through the pages of your Bible. For 400 years, God had not spoken to His people. No angels. No prophets. No kings.

The nation of Israel was scattered around the world of that time. The remnant that lived in their land felt the sting of their oppressors: Roman flags flew high in the sky, a reminder they lived at the discretion of Caesar.

Revolutions had come and gone, some successful, most short-lived, almost all bloody. False messiahs had come and gone; the religious establishment was deeply corrupt—all of this embedding a thick layer of jaded faith in the hearts of even the most devout.

Listen to the words of Zechariah, who having seen the angel Gabriel in the temple couldn't quite believe that the promises of God, long held captive in dusty scrolls, were coming to pass in his day:

"Because of our God's merciful compassion, the dawn from on high will visit us to shine on those who live in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:78-79).

If we're not careful, we might assume that we have to come to Christmas with manufactured euphoria and fake joy. Instead Jesus invites us to bring the loneliness of a lost year, the sting of division and defeat, the persistent longing for a better world to Him. And what He offers is both salvation and hope. Salvation through His perfect life, death, and resurrection. Hope that the brokenness that greeted Him in Bethlehem, that knocks uninvited on our doorsteps, will not have the last word. Christmas is a pinprick of light, leading us to that day when the darkness will be no more.

Jesus came to ordinary people. No carols serenaded the poor, peasant couple who stumbled into Bethlehem late that night. Mary and Joseph didn't know that they'd be the subject of endless nativity scenes, greeting cards, and adorn shelves at department stores.

They arrived, clinging to a promise, treasuring in their hearts the words whispered by the angel. To be blunt, Mary and Joseph were nobodies. They had little social standing. They had no public platform. The Son of God, fresh from the throne room of heaven, had no place to lay His fragile head.

Everyone in Bethlehem thought the real power was in King Herod's palace, a counterfeit king who guarded his power jealously and used violence to squash any hint of opposition. Everyone feared Herod, especially the Bethlehem parents who quivered in fear at a knock on the door. But the real power was centered in the delicate hands of the infant wrapped in tattered rags. 2,000 years later, we know Herod only as a footnote in the story of Jesus, a mere pawn in Satan's long, futile war against God.

Today we often wring our hands and clench our fists, we raise our digital voices in anger and angst at the evil and injustice that travels across our timelines. Yet, we can rest in the knowledge that one day all evil will be extinguished forever.

Jesus meets us in our longing. If anything described the people of God in the first century, it was longing. These promises of God, first spoken by prophets, seemed so distant...so unreal. Would a king, a son of David arise and lead God's people out of spiritual and political bondage? Would that forever kingdom arrive?

We're in the midst of a season of waiting. Waiting for this to end. Waiting for a vaccine to crush COVID. Waiting for life to return to normal. Waiting to see loved ones we haven't seen or have only glimpsed via Zoom. And the waiting seems to get longer—first a week, then a month, then a summer, then a year.

Waiting and longing are not activities we moderns enjoy. So much of our life has been made easy by being made swift. Fast internet, fast cars, two-day shipping. Even the microwave seems slow for a world in a hurry.

But Christmas is about waiting, longing, hoping. Unlike the promises of science, the promise of the Incarnation is certain. You can trust God's Word. The One who broke into the world as a fragile baby will return one day in power as King of Kings, crushing His enemies and ending injustice.

Yet, like those 1st century Jews, the promises of Jesus' coming can seem remote and a bit far-fetched. Year after year of suffering, brokenness, and heartache dot our calendars and afflict our lives. "Will a Messiah ever come?", they wondered. "Will Jesus ever return?", we wonder. Like Zechariah, our prayers can begin to be crusted over with cynicism, our hearts unready to hear good news.

Christmas—this season where we celebrate God delivering on His promise and being made flesh in Jesus—reminds us that what the Almighty has promised, He will deliver. The God of the first Christmas is the God who has it all under control and the One who came that first Christmas is coming back.

Light has come into the world—this hard and difficult and broken world—to guide our feet into the way of peace. Peace only comes from knowing Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. It comes from personally knowing the Prince of Peace. Jesus has come and He's coming back! And that's a Christmas gift, even in a pandemic world, that's worth waiting for!

The Lord Jesus was the first Christmas gift. Not the baby in the manger, the Savior on the cross. He came to save us from our greatest problem our sin. He's God's Christmas gift to you. Have you accepted God's Christmas gift to you? Have you committed your life to Him? Is He your Savior?

"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11).