

# A CHRISTMAS STORY

To my audience this afternoon: Repentance! I'd promised to close with a favorite Christmas story, then failed to finish reading it to you! So here it is, complete--for you, & (while I'm at it) for my Thinksheet readers. Merry Christmas!

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## A few preliminary notes:

- 1 Home & church (Sunday school) are the proper places for children to learn the **Christmas carols**. Besides, they can no longer hear them in public school or even in stores (where they've been replaced with "holiday songs")....
- 2 ....but, unlike the carols, JESUS is not fading from the public square. Year after year he's the best-selling name of the weekly news-mags--as now (12.13.04) NEWSWEEK's cover, "THE BIRTH OF JESUS: Faith & History: How the Story of Christmas Came to Be" (& when yesterday, on that Christmas website, I voted my belief in our Lord's virgin birth, I learned that 67% of responders so believe, 27% do not, & 8% are unsure). Today's **LOS ANGELES TIMES** editorial, "The New Rap on Jesus," puts "Jesus Walk" as the top tune in this "outlaw culture of sex, money, and drugs."

Something happened last night<sup>1</sup> in Lincoln Center before the New York Philharmonic concert, and this morning at breakfast I told fifteen beloved friends, seated in a circle, about it. As you will see, the story includes the Christmas card printed below. <sup>1</sup> 17 December 1993.



Salute You!

There is nothing I can give you which you have not; but there is much that, while I cannot give, you can take.

No heaven can come to us unless our hearts find rest in it today.

Take Heaven.

No peace lies in the future which is not hidden in this present instant.

Take Peace.

The gloom of the world is but a shadow,  
behind it, yet within our reach, is joy.  
Take Joy

And so, at this *Christmas* time, I greet you,  
with the prayer that for you, now and forever,  
the day breaks and the shadows flee away.  
—Fra Giovanni, A.D. 1513

Seating myself next to a plain-looking, late-middle-aged woman before the concert, I asked, "You are new to this seat, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am."

"My name is Willis Elliott." She gave me hers. "Where, may I ask, do you live?"

"Brooklyn."

"Ah, yes. And what, may I inquire, is your religion?"

"Strange that you should ask," she replied. "Just last night I was feeling very religious and decided to read the Bible straight through, beginning immediately. I'm Armenian Evangelical, but we don't have a church in Brooklyn so I joined the Episcopal Church. But let me tell you what happened last night. I started reading, and it said that God created darkness and light."

She paused, and I looked at her. "Why the frown?"

"Well, I can understand God's creating light, but why darkness?"

"Now, let me get this straight. Last night you started reading through the Bible and you got stuck before the third verse of the first chapter of the first book?"

"Yes."

"If you're going to bog down that easily, how many years do you figure it's going to take you?"

She appreciated the gentle humor, and laughed. "But if I don't understand what I'm reading, why bother?"

"Why indeed! The Bible is a talk-back book: you talk back to it, as you did, and it will talk back to you. Reading is one word for this process, prayer is another. God's Spirit helps us understand as

we reach for the light as we read. Yes, the light! You think it was not a good idea of God to make darkness?"

"Well, sometimes it seems that way."

"Yes, it does. In my pocket I have a 480-year-old Christmas card that may help. It was given to me as a greeting this afternoon by the librarian of New York Theological Seminary. The paper isn't that old, but the greeting is. It's by Fra (Brother) Giovanni, who lived joyfully for Jesus in humility and poverty." I then read it to her, pausing to look at her after each section, her smile broadening throughout.

"I think I'm ready to go on reading."

As we stood up to leave after the concert, which included Kurt Weill's "The Seven Deadly Sins," she smiled, squeezed my arm, and said, "Thank you for the Christmas card."

A few comments on this do-it-yourself, pre-commercial Christmas card:

1. Brother Giovanni gave, as a Christmas present, all that he had, the gift of challenging words closing with the gift of prayer.
2. Rest, "in this dark world of sin," is heaven: heavenly rest! And, like "eternal life" in the Gospel of John, it's available now, for the taking, with open heart and hands. So not having it is something one has deprived oneself of.
3. A hunt for mind and heart, to find the "hidden" peace here and now!
4. So much is beyond our reach, but joy is not among that much.
5. Today is epiphany, day-break! (6 January 1993)

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This story is "'God created darkness.' Why?"  
It's in my Eerdmans/95 book,  
FLOW OF FLESH, REACH OF SPIRIT, pp.12-14.

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Christmas triumphs over the worrisome illusions that things are out of control or in the wrong hands. Its two story-sets (in Matthew & Luke) rejoice that God is the Lord of **nature** (e.g., overriding natural birth) & **history** (e.g., overriding King Herod's murderous intent against any possible messianic pretender). Suspend disbelief, enter into the stories as the gospel in narrative form: *God, the Lord of nature & history, has himself come as a human infant named "Jesus," the Savior of a world otherwise doomed to continue to "sit in darkness and the shadow of death."*

The same month as "Pearl Harbor," 63 Christmases ago, we (my parents & we siblings) were sitting around Christmas dinner & listening to what in those days was America's most intellectual weekly radio program, the University of Chicago Round Table. Leading was Ernest Cadman Colwell, the Divinity School dean, under whom I was writing a doctoral dissertation. Chicago was America's most liberal university, & on that program (on the Christmas carols) we heard the whole range of belief and unbelief. And here are the heart-warming words with which Colwell closed the program: "...and best of all, the Christmas Carols are TRUE." True to God. True to the human heart. True to human life & hope. As the hymn says, "We've a story to tell to the nations." It's the Christmas Story that God's power-&-love transcends nature & history; & the same message appears in complementary narrative form as the Easter Story of the One whom human power could kill but not keep dead.