



The Immanence of Christmas

Isaiah 12:1-6

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Why is the season of Christmas so appealing to so many? Everyone loves Christmas. Interestingly enough, even if you divorce Christmas from its Christian origin, it's still appealing. Christmas, at least for now, is as big as ever in a rapidly secularized society. What allures so many people to Christmas? I believe that it's the desire for the transcendent to feel immanent. Let me explain: transcendence is that feeling of mystery, awe. It's that sense that every human being has that there is some sort of meaning to the world. This is not limited to organized religion either. Transcendence is the currency of human experience. No one can live off of being told that there is no mystery in the world. True atheists are boring, because they've lopped off a part of themselves. Consider how Albert Einstein, nowhere near a Christian man, explained it:

We are in the position of a little child, entering a huge library whose walls are covered to the ceiling with books in many different tongues. The child knows that someone must have written those books. It does not know who or how. It does not understand the languages in which they are written... That, it seems to me, is the attitude of the human mind, even the greatest and most cultured, toward God.”¹

We all are in the position of the child in the great library, or as J.R.R. Tolkien put it, we all sense “we are in a very great story”². But, as all children are, we are curious. We want to know the plot, the meaning, the language of the books in the library. So we desire for the transcendent to feel immanent. Immanence is simply closeness. In its Latin form it means “to dwell in.” What could be closer than sharing the same dwelling?

So at Christmas, some sort of magic, some sort of good feelings, some sort of kindness and mystery, becomes more tangible. We feel it in the lore of Santa Claus and elves, the twinkle of the lights, the hiddenness of the gifts under the tree, the traditions of our households. We use words like “Christmas spirit” or “Holiday cheer”. We give more freely, try to laugh more readily, and the sentiment flows like water. At Christmas, we are attempting to make the transcendent feel immanent. And sometimes, we succeed a bit. We feel the mystery more, we regain a smidge of child-like wonder in the world. But then it fades, and joy wisps away and transcendence is buried again in our busyness.

¹ Walter Isaacson, *Einstein: His Life and Universe*

² From Peter Kreeft, *The Philosophy of Tolkien*



In Isaiah 12, we get a glimpse of true Christmas spirit, because in Isaiah 12 we have a prophecy of transcendence not just *feeling* immanent, but *becoming* truly immanent. There is a day coming, says the prophet, a day whose first hour is even already here, where singing will give way to shouting, and where transcendence will be touched. A day when true joy washes over the world like a flood, a day when we will all say: “God is in our midst.” That sounds pretty good, pretty transcendent.

So how do we bridge the gap between transcendence and immanence? Isaiah gives us a three tiered vision: A Personal Clearing Away of Guilt (1-2); A Corporate Dive Into the Depths of Joy (3); A Loud Proclamation of the Wonder of Indwelling (4-6).

A Personal Clearing Away of Guilt (1-2)

Up until this point, Isaiah has been outlining for Israel the sheer magnitude of God’s grace to them. They know it’s undeserving, but he has been piling it on. He has this theme of “that day”, which we see twice in our passage. It’s a day coming when Israel will finally be saved from their own failure and their own sin. The basic idea is: because of their sin, God raises up their enemies. But a day is coming when salvation will come—not just from enemies, but from their own sin. And so Isaiah 12 is the climax of the first prominent section of the book of Isaiah, starting in chapter 6. If you go back to chapter 6, God calls out Isaiah in this vision to be his prophet, and Isaiah sees the holiness of God being declaring by the angels. And his response is: “Woe is me! I am a man of unclean lips”. Then you remember, an angel comes to him with a burning coal, and touches his lips, and says: “your guilt is taken away, and your sin is atoned for.” So Isaiah has this experience of grace, and his proclamation now to Israel is that the same grace is coming for them.

So in **verses 1-2**, we get a picture of that coming grace. The **you** in **verse 1** is singular, showing us that this is a personal experience that all the redeemed must have. We must all have our Isaiah 12 experience. And It looks like a turning away of the just anger of God against sin. We must go from being God’s enemies to being comforted in his arms. There is no way that his own holiness, his transcendence, might dwell with us, if we are his enemy.

This is the great wonder of salvation, and a great wonder of Christmas. Christ came into the world to die a sinner’s death, in order to absorb the anger of God against sin and bring comfort to God’s people. Jesus Christ is the incarnate form of Isaiah’s burning coal, the atonement of God in human form. At the cross, God turned his back on Jesus Christ so that he doesn’t turn his back on you. So when God says: “I will comfort you”, it’s not a trick, it’s not reluctant. His disposition is open arms, because Jesus Christ has traded places with us.

Now look at the saying of the redeemed on the day of Christ in **verse 2**. See the security there? This is not a grasp for some mysterious good feeling or vibe, this is *trust*. Do you really *trust* that God is not angry with you? This is the first step in drinking in the joy of the gospel. He has become your salvation, he became man, the very thing necessary to save you. He had to become like you to bear your sin, and so he did! What strength, what song.



And all of this is deeply personal. God is not interested in saving abstractions. He does not die for numbers on a spreadsheet. Look at how Isaiah addresses him in **verse 2**, he says “the Lord God”. You don’t see it well there in your English translation, but this is a repetition of God’s personal name, Yawheh. Yaw Yawheh is my strength, the text says. My God, my God, he belongs to me because I belong to him. Do you like to give gifts at Christmas? Here is a free gift: Yahweh himself is your strength. You like to sing songs? Here is something to sing about—not just a song of Yahweh, but he himself is the air in your lungs, he is your song.

Man, that is incredible. And here Isaiah paints us a picture—this is what we will say on that day that is coming. But remember, while Isaiah has a specific day in mind, when all things are made new, he also has another day in mind as God speaks through him. That day is the day of incarnation, when Christ’s work begins on earth. That is a day when we give thanks. Although not all is complete until Christ comes, we live now in the sure promise of his coming. Christmas is the guarantee of redemption accomplished, and therefore we can say even now: God has become my salvation”.

A Corporate Dive Into the Depths of Joy (3)

The goodness of this doesn’t stop though at a personal clearing of guilt. Look in verse 3, there is not only a song for us, but an action. Here in **verse 3** the “you” is plural. Salvation is personal, but it is never divorced from the people of God. We all will draw water from the wells of salvation, and we will do it together.

I love the image of water here. The picture for the Israelites draws them back to their wandering in the desert. For days there was no water, and they began to cry out to God in grumbling: “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?” Can you imagine then when Moses strikes the rock and water gushes out? That’s the image: throwing yourself with abandon to the great pool—splashing and drinking. The drawing water from this well is not a chore, it’s a joy, that’s what leads me to believe it’s an abundant spring. Notice too “wells”, not just one well, but many, too many to count!

But not only does Israel think back on their physical thirst in the desert, we all can understand spiritual thirst, when David says in Psalm 63: “O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” What is life without God in Christ, except one great desert? We search for spiritual meaning, for significance, for transcendence, and all we find are empty wells and broken down cisterns. Isn’t this the lament of Christmas, that none of our “Christmas cheer” can ever really fill us with lasting joy? Maybe we get a spark of happiness, but true joy? Where is that well found?

The Scriptures don’t try to hide it from us. In 1 Corinthians Paul says we all drink from the spiritual rock, which is Christ. The incarnation of Jesus Christ is the advent of living water into the world—Jesus himself says “whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst again.” And when



he dies, as his side is pierced by a spear, water flows out—showing us that it is through the work of Christ that the wells of joy are opened, deep deep eternal wells. Wells of salvation, water in the desert.

So if you are looking for meaning, for transcendence, you must go here. And you must go together. The church, the people of God, this is the place where we jump in together. Why do you think we immerse ourselves as an entrance into this family? Because we know that the Christian life is all about the great salvation waters—the flood of grace from Christ that washes us away and gives us new, lasting eternal life. One commentator says: “There is nothing of the piety of the pond in Christianity.”³ Ponds are stagnant, small. These are living wells. Do you lack joy in life? Here it is, this is the message of Christmas, the immanence of God brings wells of joy.

We draw from this well now, who is Christ by the Spirit. But one day, we will be fully submerged. One day, as Revelations says: “the Lamb in the midst of the throne shall be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

A Loud Proclamation of the Wonder of Indwelling (4-6)

The last step in the immanence of Christmas is how it affects our witness. When we experience the great grace of God—when he clears away our guilt and is pierced so that living water of joy can flow from his side, what other option do we have but proclaim his exalted name? This makes sense: we are naturally born to be exalters. Why do people hang Christmas lights? Why do they sing Christmas carols? They want to *proclaim* their Christmas spirit. So if we have something infinitely greater than that, namely God himself, **verse 5** tells us right: “sing praises to the Lord, he has done gloriously; let this be made known in all the earth.” To drink deeply of the gospel is to proclaim the gospel, because the joy of the gospel is not complete until we show it, we speak of it, it shines in our faces, it seeps into our actions, it reinterprets our temperament. C.S. Lewis says it well:

I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed.⁴

The day is coming, is even here now, when we will not only sing, but **verse 6** *shout* for Joy. Can you believe that? Some of you are pretty reserved, no doubt. But when Jesus comes back again, you won't be able to help it any longer.

Let's end here in **verse 6**. You may carry many burdens today—and you do not feel like rejoicing. Christmas Day is passed, and some are already packing up their decorations. Maybe for you it's time to roll back to your normal diet of anxiety and insecurity. Perhaps the new year has many

³ Leon Morris, *John*

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*



uncertainties ahead, or that past year's sorrows and loss still linger. I tell you something like: "you have been cleared of sin", and it sounds good no doubt. It is good to no longer be God's enemy. But you need hope *now*, you need joy *now*, in the midst of our tired, broken down, decaying earthly world. You need transcendence. So let me tell you: this is the ultimate goal of salvation. God does not clear you of your sin in Christ and give you a well of salvation just so you can live a good life in a new world to come. He does all that, to be sure. But the goal of salvation is not to make a home for you apart from him. The goal of salvation is for you to live *with* him. His anger is turned from you, all the wells of his water are yours, but most importantly, **verse 6**, why do you shout and sing? Because the Holy One of Israel is *in our midst*.

Verse 6, then, is the bright sun of this text that all the other planets orbit around. It's the epitome of Christmas. What could be more transcendent than the Holiness of God? His holiness is set-apartness, his God-ness, it's what makes him truly God—perfect and without any need to change or grow—holy today, holy yesterday, holy tomorrow, holy forever. And what could be more immanent than to be "in our midst"?

And yet, his holiness as being entirely different from us does not constitute relational distance. No, his holiness is not abstract, it is relational! It is in our midst: the holiness of God dwells with man. We tend to think of God's holiness as his set-apartness, and so we imagine that we will never truly be able to approach him, to live with him. But God doesn't need us to define him. He would be holy whether we existed or not. So his holiness is not defined by his separation from the unholy—his holiness is actually defined by his proximity to the unholy, by his sheer grace in making the unholy into his purified possession!⁵

Holy, Holy, Holy cry all the angels of Heaven. And so we cry now and will cry forever with God. But we also shout: the Holy One is with us. We dwell with him. He will never leave us. We can trust him, we will not be afraid. He is our strength and song. Emmanuel has come, the Holy to dwell with the unholy, and the transcendent has become immanent. This is the true meaning of Christmas, and such is what we will say in the presence of God forever.

⁵ "Holiness is not the antithesis of relation—it does not drive God from the unholy and lock God into absolute pure separateness. Rather, God's holiness is the quality of God's relation to that which is unholy; as the Holy One, he does not simply remain in separation, he comes to his people and purifies them, making them into his own possession." John Webster, *Holiness*

