

Merry Christmas! Today is the 9th Day of Christmas, which means we're supposed to figure out just exactly where to put 9 dancing ladies even though the rest of the place has filled up with dairy cattle, fistfulls of rings, and more poultry than any self-respecting feast would allow. It's also a lot more than just that, of course.. On the horizon, the Magi have nearly arrived, and with them, they bring an even odder set of gifts than our Days of Christmas song. They bring gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The frankincense and myrrh, you probably know, are fragrances reserved almost entirely for burial rites in Jesus' day. But the gold? Why a pot of money for a brand new baby that ain't gonna need a college fund? My favorite theory is that the gold is meant to be a sort of beginning of life mirror to the bag of silver Judas will trade for Jesus' death years later. But if that's true, then all the gifts the little Lord Jesus receives at his birth are harbingers of his death bookending his life with tragedy. That's a heavy thing to talk about any time of year, but it's especially a lot right now.

The thing is, when we sanitize the Christmas Story to be just about opulent gifts and a perfectly swaddled baby and a barn that smells like roses and angel's breath, we miss the gritty reality of the world Jesus was born into. Of course, there's the poor timing of the travel required by the census and certainly the pain and difficulty of childbirth in the stable out back, but it's more than that still. (By the way, did you know that for a very long time, it was forbidden to paint Mary in the pangs of childbirth? Yeah, if you go way back to Genesis, one of the punishments for the fruit debacle in the Garden of Eden was that women would experience pain in childbirth, so to show Mary experiencing that would bring some tricky implications for what people thought about sin and Mary and Jesus. For what it's worth, Natalie Lennard has some fantastic works of art depicting a more realistic labor in the stable. Really powerful stuff.) Anyway, there's the pain and messiness of birth through which Jesus enters the world, but it's more still. Because Jesus is also born under an empire that fears any challenge to its power. And when those Magi make their way to the governor's mansion in search of an unknown but certainly not Roman king to come, Herod gets spooked. And in his fear and rage, he orders, not a search party, but mass infanticide. All children born roughly when the Magi supposed should be killed. So when Jesus braces against the cold air and screams his lungs full for the first time, he's born into a manhunt disgustingly far-reaching and thorough. His family hears of the trouble on its way and skips town, leaves the province altogether, and flees to Egypt. They're still under Roman rule there, but at least that governor has heard nothing of foreign kings and bizarre gifts and a king to defeat all kings now in his midst. The recovering Mary, silent Joseph, and the little Lord Jesus only return when word reaches them that Herod has died, and even then, they find a new home just to be safe. When people talk about Jesus being a refugee, this is what they mean. It's not some misinterpretation of the Census In Bethlehem story. It's not the stable. It's the terrible threat of death that began the moment he was born. So maybe it's no accident that the gifts he received mirror the end of his life because the end of his life was dangerously close from The First Day of Christmas.

Now, I know it's a little heavy to think about Jesus' death now between the cuteness of the Christmas Story and everything else that's going on in the world, but it can be a good reminder to us. We aren't celebrating the birth of a child, or at least, we aren't celebrating just the birth of a child. Kids are born all the time, and that's great. If you've got a new baby or a new grandbaby or even a new great-grandbaby, congrats! What a spot of light, and if you show me a picture, I will tell you they are the cutest thing that ever was. But that's not what Christmas is about. Christmas is about the birth of our savior. Yes, he was swaddled and was also the cutest thing that ever was. But that's not it. It's who he will become that matters. Jesus will grow to be the one to set us free.

Now, it is pretty incredible that in his birth, Jesus is God-become-human. I don't want to discount that. Something in us is elevated because Jesus takes us on. But also, it's his life, what he'll ask of us, what he'll endure because of us, and finally, what he'll give for us that imbues this season with meaning. A child comes into the world, yes. That same child comes into a world broken and immediately at odds with him, yes. That same child grows into a fine preacher and a miracle worker, yes. But that same precious cherub of a baby child bears our sins, his life traded for a bag of silver and his body washed with fragrances to hide the stench of rot. That empty belly of his mother's prefiguring an empty tomb thirty years later. One Mary searching for a place to bring him into life, and another Mary searching for him after death. Descending to be with us, and ascending to bring us to God.

Today we pause in the midst of everything to remember, once more before time passes too quickly, who this child is and what this child will do. This is Jesus, the Christ. This is God Among Us.